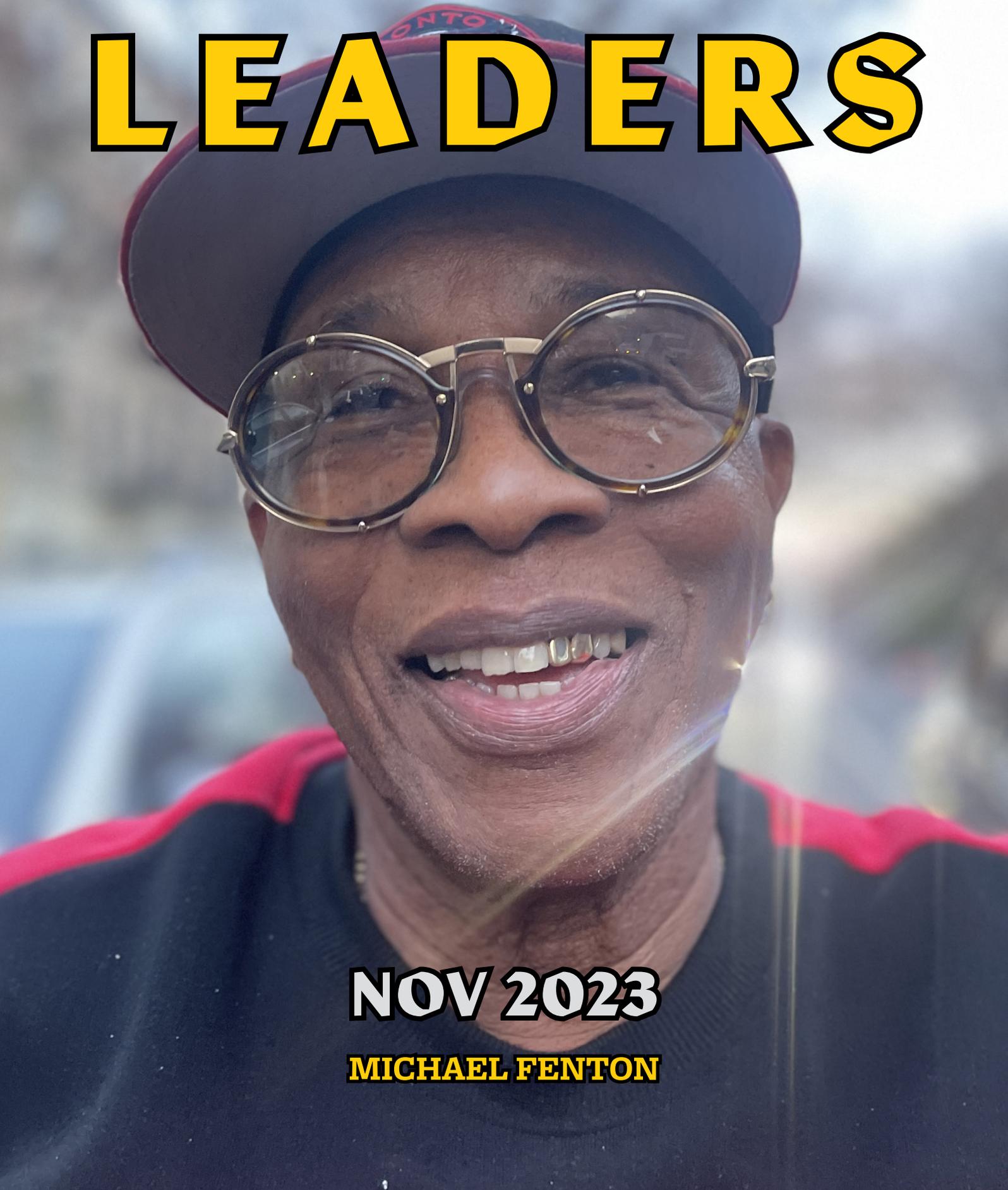


LICENSEE LEADERS



NOV 2023

MICHAEL FENTON

Community

The New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission’s (TLC) Licensee Leaders is a media program that highlights the stories and voices of TLC’s community of drivers and other licensees, amplifying leadership in accessibility, customer service, and safe driving.



Licensee Leaders’ monthly program engages the TLC community through long and short-form features. The series also recognizes citywide and national awareness months while celebrating the viewpoints of our licensees as they relate to culture and heritage, industry, and safety.

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Michael Fenton	5



TLC's Licensee Leaders programming for November 2023 recognizes and salutes New York City's taxi and for-hire vehicle (FHV) drivers and their dedication to road traffic safety and excellence in customer service.

Drivers represent the heart of a pivotal transportation industry in a City that is in motion 24/7 constantly focused on progress.



In this issue, TLC engages FHV owner-driver Michael Fenton, a livery driver for over 45 years in Central Brooklyn.

Originally from Trinidad and arriving to NYC in the 1970s, Fenton speaks on how the industry and his community have evolved over time, for the better, and shares his collection of TLC drivers licenses from across a four decade period.

INTRODUCTION



Driver Spotlight

Michael Fenton

As November 2023's *Licensee Leader*, Michael Fenton is a man about town in NYC's Brooklyn licensed livery scene. Originally from Trinidad, Fenton has been driving professionally for over 45 years. Meeting with TLC in Central Brooklyn, Fenton talks the Brooklyn livery/community car industry, NYC in the 1970s and 80s, and how both continue to evolve for the better.

Michael Fenton: I am a very straightforward person. I am very unique. I teach my children the right way. If you go the right way, you will be blessed

and live as long as I live. That's that.

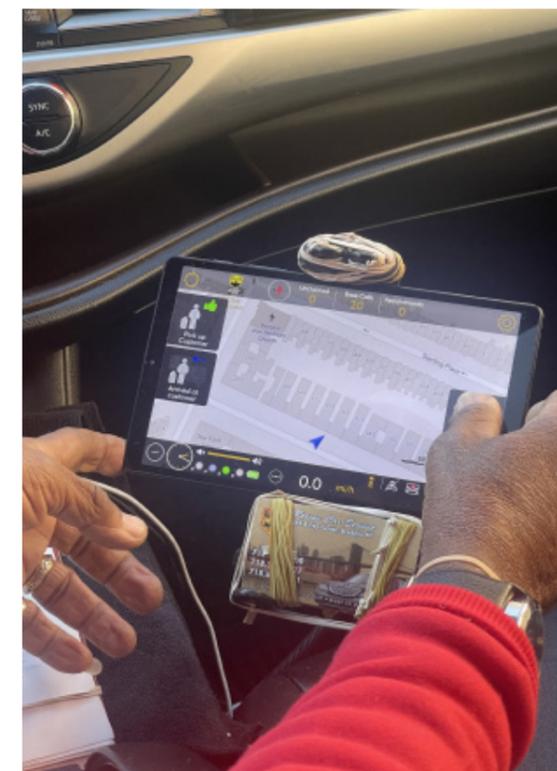
TLC: You drive a licensed livery vehicle. What's a typical trip like?

MF: When passengers call for a car, this [points to tablet in car] starts beeping. And when it's beeping, I press it to accept the trip. And there are other drivers around too. But whoever presses it first gets the trip. If another driver gets it, you wait until another call comes up. And it's the same procedure. "Beep. Beep. Beep."

And I press accept. And then I drive to wherever it is the person is getting picked up. I'll wait there and blow the horn. The passenger's phone number will come up, and when it does, I might sometimes have to call them and ask, "Good morning. Did you call for a cab?" I'll tell them that I am outside. They might say, "Give me two minutes." And they come outside, get in the car, and I take them to the destination.

There was a rule passed by the TLC at some point; some drivers were working and not getting paid. With the [Car Service Upfront Payment Policy], you tell the customer when they enter the car that they have to pay the money upfront [when pre-arranged and price is quoted beforehand, prior to the vehicle being dispatched]. If, in that case, the person does not want to pay upfront, I remind them that when they take Uber, they also have to pay upfront. I remind them that the upfront payment is not because we don't trust them.

Years ago, before the rule, some people tried not to pay. Someone might say, when arrived, "I have to go upstairs to get the money." And then they won't come back. So, we acknowledge that, and so when they get a call, when the car is out front, they are reminded over the phone to "pay the driver upfront." So, it's out of my hands. Because when I press that button, when I arrive, they get that call that tells them that. It's out of my hands. So, they know it's not me, it's



Fenton shows us how he accepts trips driving a community car

the company that asks for upfront payment.

TLC: When did you first join this industry?

MF: I've been in the business for so long. See, I have my licenses here [shows a stack of TLC driver licenses] from over the years. I keep them in plastic. I want to show you from when to when I have licenses for. This is very important. And I'm going to give you a piece of history.

I started to drive in 1976 or 1977. This [points to a laminated document] is from 1978. Before driving, I was working in a shop – I'm a welder by trade. I was 34 years old.

I am 78 years old now. And I've kept this from over the years. It's important to me. If I meet an officer, I might tell them, "I've been driving since before you were born!" [Laughs.]

TLC: TLC was around five years old then. What do you remember about it?

MF: The first TLC office. It was on 42nd Street and 7th Avenue, near Times Square. It might have been on the second or the third floor. I think you had to walk upstairs. It looked like an office. But at that time, they didn't have any computers. I remember the person at the window. They asked me what I came for. I remember I came for my hack license. They told me I had to go to [a] doctor who would fill out a form. It was for a physical, an exam to show that the person is mentally and physically able to operate and drive a public taxicab or car. And so, I took this paper to TLC's office, and they laminated it. And so, if the police were to ever stop me, I would have to show them that with my hack license.

It was different then. Back then, for us, licensed livery [community] cars, there were different rules with displaying tax stamps on cars. This registration [from inside vehicle, points to lower left corner of windshield] costs \$450.00. Back then it was \$40.00. You used to need to get both a tax stamp and a registration. But I remember working at night at the time, and seeing people go up to com-



Fenton walks us through how the TLC drivers license has evolved over time

mercial cars, like from the telephone company, and stealing the tax stamps off of cars like that, and selling them. And so, the DMV eventually decided to put everything in one - to include the registration and the tax stamp. You have to pay \$450 for everything, which helped prevent illegal activity and illegal driving.

TLC: You must have many memories of the industry, driving for over 45 years.

MF: I received all of these licenses from TLC [gestures back to his license collection]. This one was from 1986. From young to old! This, here, was '89. And this one, '91. At that time, you had to do one every two years.



License numbers from the above image have been removed to respect privacy. This is reflected across all images that contain license numbers in this interview.

I had a beard then. I had the photos done in Manhattan at a photography studio. At that time, TLC didn't take their own photos. They didn't have the camera yet. You had to take your own photo. You would mail in the application with your photo. You would send it to them.

Here's one from '93 [gestures to another license]. Then TLC went from this big size to this smaller-sized [license].

TLC: In this photo, it looks like you have sunglasses on. They accepted this photo for your TLC driver's license back then?

MF: Yes. This was not TLC's own photo. It was one that you did your-



Fenton shares his early days as an FHV driver

self and mailed to them. They are actually glasses, though. They're tinted.

This other photo is from 2000. And this one here is from 2005. This was the last one where you could send your own picture. After that, TLC had a camera to take their own photo, and said you had to use their photo. See, from here on, the same picture is used. This is 2007; the first year I had that new photo. TLC wrote everybody, including me, who had that old license, and said they needed a picture of you. This is the memorial one. And from there, every two years, the same picture was used.

And then 2011 was the last year they used the bigger size for the license. They switched to the smaller one.

As you can see, I never had to reapply for my license. I have the same number from the beginning. I've never had any big violation or anything from TLC. I do the right thing.

TLC: Let's backtrack a little. Where did you grow up?

MF: I have more or less spent more time here. But I grew up in the Caribbean, in Trinidad. I was born in Trinidad in 1945. I came to this country in 1970. I went first to Philadelphia for maybe two or three weeks. My mother and sister were living there. But I didn't like Philadelphia too much. So, I came to New York and I've lived in New York until now.



YOU HAVE TO TREAT EVERYONE LIKE A HUMAN BEING, HOW YOU'D LIKE SOMEONE TO TREAT YOU.

WE ALL HAVE TO LEARN TO HELP, RESPECT, AND LIVE WITH EACH OTHER.





Fenton shares a storied Brooklyn history since becoming licensed in the 1970s

TLC: What were you doing before you started your career as a driver?

MF: I used to work in a metal factory. It was at 601 Atkins Avenue [in Brooklyn]. I worked there for about 6 to 7 years. I was a spot welder. The salary was very small. It was maybe a hundred and something dollars a week.

At that time, it also took two years to sponsor your family member. So, my mother sponsored [her children], and then, when I came, I sponsored my wife. I stayed by my sister-in-law on Euclid Avenue, when I first came, for two years. And then, she was having a baby, and so the husband said I would have to find a place too, because they wanted a room for the baby. So, I left there and found a room on Dean Street, between Franklin and Classon Avenue. I was paying \$13 a week!

I lived there till my wife arrived. And then we moved to Lefferts Avenue.

TLC: It sounds like you have strong roots in Brooklyn.

MF: Near there, on the corner of Lefferts and Brooklyn, there's a Jewish school there. That school, my two kids were born in that school. It used to be a hospital. It was the Lefferts General Hospital. The other day I had a passenger. We were talking and he was asking me if I knew how to get to his destination. I told him, "I know how to get there. I've lived my life here." So, he said he was going by that school. And I said, "Do you know

that school was once a hospital?" He said, "No!" I said, "Yes, that school was a hospital." He said, "My daughter goes to that school!" He wanted to make a bet on if I was right. And he called someone on the phone, spoke in his language, and he came back to tell me, "Well, that's a very smart kid. You're right. I just spoke to my father. I was born here and didn't know that it was a hospital."

When my wife and I separated, I moved on to Flatbush Avenue, from 1978 until now.

TLC: How has the neighborhood changed since the 1970s?

MF: There used to be a drug epidemic. In the '70s. And I have seen it. This is Underhill here [where the interview is being conducted]. Washington Avenue is on the corner right up there. I used to work for a base near there, Spotlight Car Service. I used to work nights. On Washington Avenue, Underhill Avenue, Franklin Avenue, there were a lot of people dealing drugs at that time.

There used to be a lot of shootings. People were selling drugs, upset that they were going into each other's areas. And all of that is cleaned up now. The place is much safer now. Now people can walk around at night, with a tablet in their hand. And no one will rob them. But, before, if you walk with a pencil in your hand, there would be a chance someone would take it. They used to rob you.



Fenton suggests drivers take care of the cleanliness of their vehicles

Bed Stuy had a lot of people who came back and bought the brownstone houses. And some of them remodeled them, opening things like diners. And everyone in the area comes together and everybody likes each other. These times now are good times.

See how the neighborhood is quiet? And where I live, it's even more quiet. There was a time I used to park my car in the street. And sometimes at two in the morning, I'd wake up to find the windows broken. I've had a garage now for 22 years and I park there now.

"Do you accept?" [A call comes in on Michael's tablet, interrupting him.] Out of the \$27, I make all of it because it's my car. But the company charges

a base fee. It's around \$100 or \$125 a week. A driver can work 24 hours a day if they want. The system is on 24 hours. Some drivers work days, some work nights.

TLC: What is your routine like these days?

MF: I get up every morning at 3:30 a.m. I shave, I take my shower, have breakfast. Then I take my wife and drop her off at work in Far Rockaway, and then I start to work from 5:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. From 3:00 p.m. to the evening, I stop work. My kids say, "Daddy, but you don't work for anybody; you work for yourself. Why are you still getting up so early?" That is the reason why I live so long. Because I get up in the morning.

I pay my taxes. At the end of the year, I get my 1099 (IRS 1099 Form). I pay my taxes and I keep my receipts.

I have three grandchildren. One is 28 [years old]. One is 14. And one, who is special needs, is 24. He never spoke. He mostly stays in front of the TV. So, I pick him up in the evenings sometimes.

I have to live a life now for me. I always try to live a decent life. I look one way. Sometimes my son will tell me, "That is from the old school." But I tell him, "The old school people are still alive!" It's good to listen to your parents.

Try to always do the right thing. What goes around, comes around.

TLC: What other changes have you noticed in the taxi and FHV industries?

MF: My son drives a yellow cab. He doesn't own his car; he leases it. He gets his car down by Long Island City. He rents a car and works Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. The [yellow cab industry] changed a lot once COVID came. He was making less money because of COVID. He's still driving though.

[Fenton takes out a notebook and opens it.] I think I have it here.

TLC: How have you seen the licensed livery community evolve over time?

MF: [Fenton shows us a page in his notebook.] These are the companies that they had a long time ago. One was Hummingbird Car Service on Clarendon Road and Rogers Avenue. Another was Sunjet Car Service. These are bases that were all started by Caribbean people. This one here closed; the owner died. This other one was closed around 15 years ago. Flamingo, another base, is still in service. It's the same family that is running it. The father opened it in 1970-something. And then he moved to Florida and put it in his son's hands – so his son took it over.

White Top – this was a base whose

owner is from Haiti, and he opened a base on St. Johns between Kingston and Albany. He eventually got sick, went back to Haiti, and his daughter took it over. When his daughter took it over, it was a big building. Then the daughter also got sick, and she sold the building along with the base. She ended up reopening the base though.

Blue Ribbon is a base from Bed Stuy. Brown and Brown is another one – a man and his wife owned it. Blue Ribbon and Sunjet had the same owner. Winthrop was one whose owner is from Jamaica. He had his base on Bedford and Tilden Avenue. He sold the base and bought a building down in Canarsie. I think on Ralph Avenue. Then he sold that building, went back to Jamaica, and opened a big hotel. All of these are Caribbean. Except for Brown and Brown – they're American. Just In Time was also Caribbean, from Trinidad. Transportation, another from Jamaica. Solidarity, from Haiti.

These were the car services in those days. Here in Brooklyn people would use them who experienced service refusals from other services.

Black Pearl – they were one of the firsts to open a car service. Before that, it was just yellow cabs. One of the reasons he opened his car service was because people of color were having difficulty finding rides. He was actually a politician. Calvin Williams was his name.



Prior to widespread computer access, dispatchers made contact with drivers using radio communications, Fenton highlights

Black Pearl's cars displayed a sign in the window that read: Special people ride Black Pearl. And all of their drivers had this sign in the car.

If you took a taxi and said you were going to Fulton Street, back then, the driver would say, "No, no, no, no." It was terrible. I don't blame them, in a way, because someone could run out of the car, not wanting to pay. Those were drastic days.

But what got them was, when you joined his base, he wanted you to paint your car red. But, when police would see that, they would stop the car and give the driver a ticket for having a red car. Because it looked

too much like an emergency vehicle.

TLC: What was it like communicating with base dispatchers back in the 1970s?

MF: Dispatchers back then didn't use computers to dispatch trips. No one was. And as drivers we didn't receive dispatched trips that way.

I'm going to show you what we used to use. [Fenton shows us a picture of a large radio receiver/transmitter from the 1970s.] This is the radio I used to use. You used to carry it to and from your car every day. People used to break into the trunk of your car to take it out.

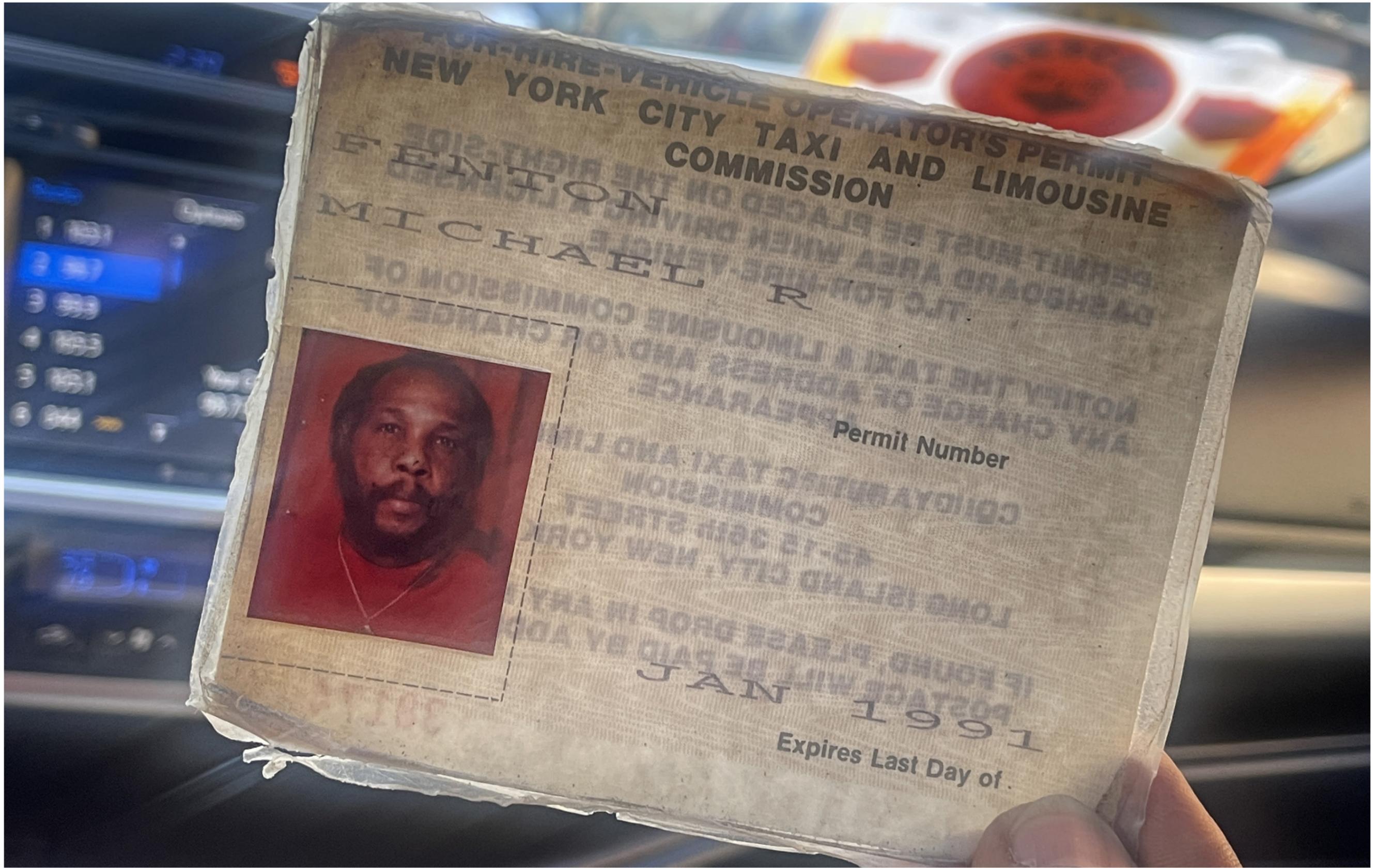


**REMEMBER TO HAVE CONSIDERATION FOR
OTHER DRIVERS, PASSENGERS, AND
THE PEOPLE ON THE STREET.**

HAVE PATIENCE.

**THE INDUSTRY FINDS WAYS TO GIVE BACK.
DO THE RIGHT THING.**





Fenton mentions how, since first joining the industry, driver demographics have become more diverse, including age and gender

This is the radio we used. I used to keep it in the trunk, on a steel plate. And then up front, you'd have this other piece, with your mic.

How the system has changed since then has come drastically. Those days, there were two radio shops in Brooklyn. Over on McDonald Avenue. I remember both owners were named Barry. You would buy your radio, which costed \$1,200. This was a small radio. Bigger ones had even more power.

The power [of the radio] mattered. There was competition among drivers on radios. The dispatcher would put the call out: "I need one for St. John's between Washington and Underhill." So, you would have to quickly



A radio Fenton used to communicate with dispatchers in the 1970s

press the button on your mic. [Makes radio sound.] And the other driver would be competing for the same trip using their radio. They would call your number if you got the trip; my number was 400. I would press down on the mic. "Four hundred! Four hundred! Four hundred!" [Fenton emphasizes how quickly he'd speak into the radio when competing for a trip.] And then I would release from the mic. Whomever the dispatcher heard first, clearly, would get the trip. And at the same time, we drivers couldn't hear each other. If another driver spoke, and I spoke, we didn't hear what each said over the radio. I'm giving you history! It was competition.

And not everyone could afford to buy a radio. But I had two of these radios. I bought one, and then the second for backup. This was because the inside of the radio could get burned. That would cost about \$200-something or \$300 for the regulator in the radio.

You had to take that to the shop. And if the radio were to break down now, I couldn't wait until tomorrow, so I had a spare radio.

Oh, and this, here, was an FM radio. They had an AM and FM. The first one that came out was the AM radio. It was small like this. But it had a very long antenna. It was maybe about three yards. When you went to the car wash, you had to take the antenna off, fold it, and keep it in your trunk. So, I took this picture last night. I asked my wife if she had the radio.

I had one in my garage, and I had one in my house still. This radio was a Motorola. It is heavy, heavy, heavy!

TLC: How did the driver community support each other at the time?

MF: In those days, sometimes, drivers would get held up. If the driver had someone who was trying to stick them up, they could get on the mic, when they have a chance, and say, "One eleven. One eleven. One eleven." This meant that you were being held up by someone [in the vehicle]. That person in the car doesn't know what you're saying. But the dispatcher did. And she would put it out on the radio to the drivers. "I have a one-eleven, one-eleven, one-eleven. St. Johns between Washington and Underhill." And you would then see all of your friends, other drivers who you worked with, drive around and encircle your vehicle, so you have support.

Years ago, we met other drivers more. We would come out and talk, have lunch together. Back then drivers used to talk more, like maybe about the TLC or different changes. It's a different generation now. And it's a younger generation now. Early on when I started working, it was mostly men, in their forties and fifties. A lot of my friends who I used to work with have passed away.

These days I tend to meet other drivers when there's a meeting, through the base.

TLC: In your opinion, what are some things to be mindful of as a driver?

MF: I always keep a clean car. This car is six years old now. But, you see, it's clean. And smelling good. I clean my car four or five times a day. I have a duster in the car.

I set myself up right. I'm from the Caribbean. And we know about bush tea. Have you ever heard about bush tea? We boil and drink it. I also drink turmeric, ginger, garlic, onion, spice, clove, and black pepper. You put it in water. I make a big pot of it. And every morning, that is my tea. I've built my immune system. So, when I have a customer which is coughing or who is going to the hospital, I feel as though – they are not necessarily going to the hospital to sit and talk and laugh, but because of some ailment. So, I put on my mask. It's better to be cautious.

TLC: What might you suggest to new drivers joining this industry?

MF: Remember to have consideration for other drivers, passengers, and the people on the street. Have patience. Rushing is not going to take you anywhere. Also, keep your car clean. When someone comes in a clean car, they will want to recommend you to somebody else. Keep the taxi and FHV industry clean. The industry will find ways to give back. Do the right thing.

TLC: How do you hope the industry will continue to improve?



DISPATCHERS BACK THEN DIDN'T USE COMPUTERS TO DISPATCH TRIPS. NO ONE WAS.

YOU WOULD BUY YOUR RADIO, WHICH COSTED \$1,200 .. WHOMEVER THE DISPATCHER HEARD FIRST, CLEARLY, WOULD GET THE TRIP.

I'M GIVING YOU HISTORY! IT WAS COMPETITION.



MF: I am happy that there is regulation by TLC and that it educates the public. What I also admire is that TLC sends an email almost every day. Something I don't like is that there are illegally operating [taxis and FHV]. It bothers me a lot. I pay \$580 a month for insurance for this car. That's about \$7,000 a year for insurance. I also have other expenses every month and repairs. And I have a clean license. Meanwhile, someone else who is driving a regular, non-licensed car, is working as an illegal [taxi or FHV]. It bothers me. But otherwise, the industry has developed a great deal.

TLC: As a safe driver with nearly five decades of experience, what advice do you have for NYC drivers?

MF: Take your time. If you think you are running late, then set your alarm clock 20 minutes earlier. But don't rush. You're going to get to a light anyway and have to wait. Also, you always have to yield to pedestrians. And be mindful of your blind spots.

Pay attention to what you're doing. And get off the phone. Get off the phone! If you want to talk on the phone, pull aside and talk there. You're saving your life and somebody else's life. And that somebody might be your family. Also, something I see every morning, don't go in the bus lane. The bus lane is for buses. Don't do it. This is New York City. In some other places, it's different. You have

to treat everyone like a human being, how you'd like someone to treat you. We all have to learn to help, respect, and live with each other.

TLC: What are you looking forward to in the future?

MF: I don't have the intention of retiring. I'm serious. I said to myself, if I retire and stay home, I will be bored and maybe the master will take me too. You sit around your house, and eat, and drink.

When I go to work, and I have my customers there, they are the ones who keep me alive. I like hearing the horn. But, if I sit in the house, I will instead hear the fire truck, sanitation – that's all I will hear. I like to come outside, to meet people. Every day I learn something from a passenger. Every day. It makes you feel good. You might hear something that will heal you or help you. We learn from each other. And what I learn from you, I tell somebody else tomorrow. And they tell somebody else the next day. And so, we go.

I go to country every year, for Carnival. You know the Mardi Gras? Well, we have one. I go for three weeks with my wife every year. The only time I missed was when there was COVID. I make sure when I work, I put my change down for my Carnival. And when I go to Carnival, I meet people from Brazil, from Toronto, from here, from London. And we learn from each other. And I've learned a lot from this

Fenton says he doesn't plan to retire, finding purpose in his work as a livery driver



**WE LEARN FROM EACH OTHER.
AND WHAT I LEARN FROM YOU, I
TELL SOMEBODY TOMORROW.**

**AND THEY TELL SOMEBODY ELSE
THE NEXT DAY. AND SO, WE GO.**

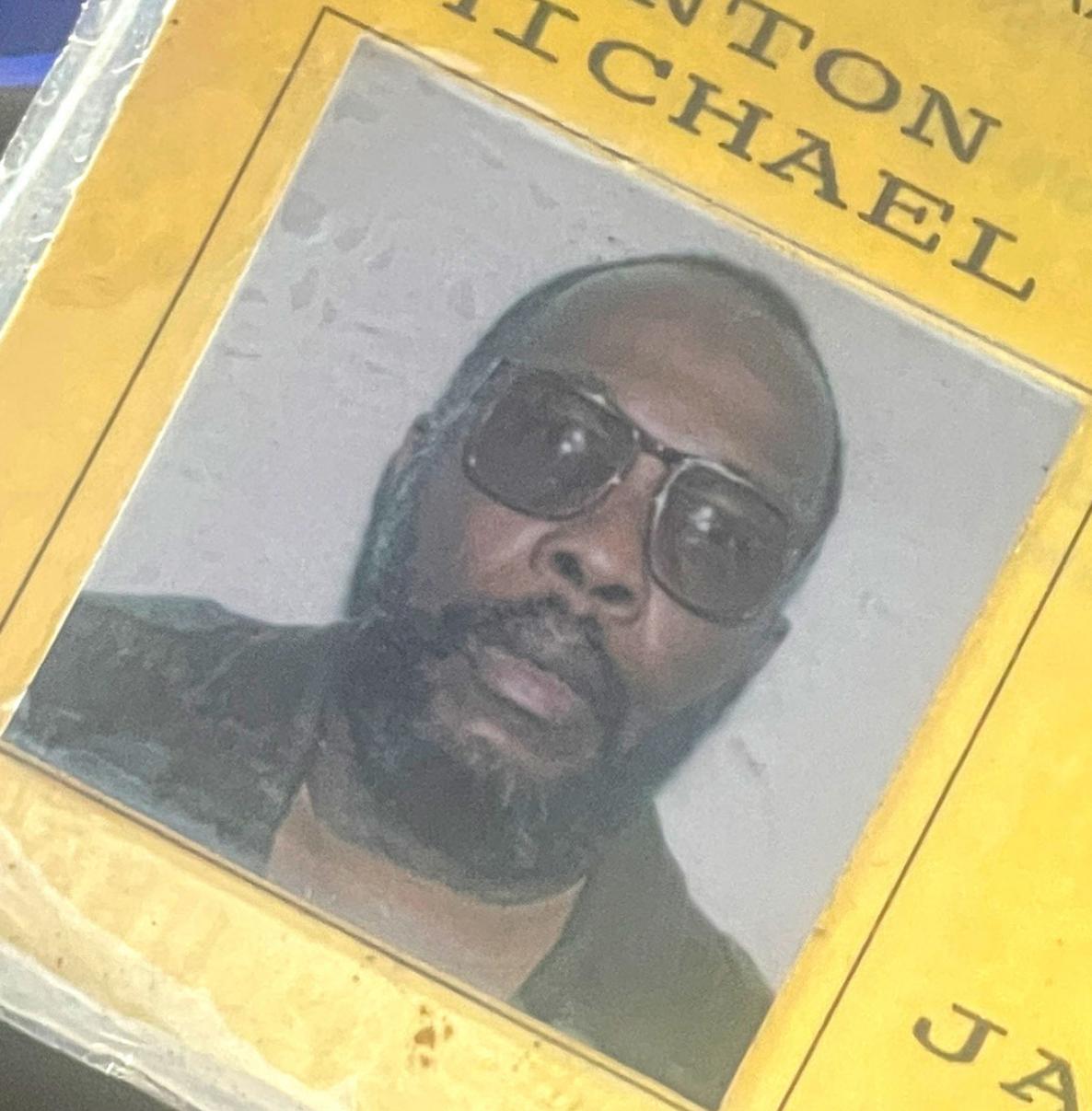


Your City, Your Teams, Your Station!
98.7 ESPN

THANK YOU

FOR-HIRE VEHICLE
NEW YORK CITY TAXI and

FENTON
MICHAEL



JAN