

## THE STORY GOES | JEFFREY ARNDT | VIA

**MOLLY:** Hello! It's me, Molly, and I'm here with Kiran. You are listening to The Story Goes.

**KIRAN:** Welcome!

**MOLLY:** Hello. We did it. It's a San Antonio podcast focused on San Antonio people, who are working inside organizations who are making a difference in San Antonio. The Story Goes is really, well first, it's a collaborative podcast between KLRN, your local public television station. I always do it that way, as if I have to. (JEFFREY laughs)

**KIRAN:** I bet they appreciate it.

**MOLLY:** I'm ready to do all of their stuff. They're all creative. And SA2020, the organization that drives progress toward a shared vision of a thriving San Antonio. We would like to tell a more complete story of the people and organizations who are really moving the needle towards that Community Vision. It just so happens that today we have one of those people. Mr. – He's looking around. Mr. Jeffrey Arndt.

**KIRAN:** It's you! [\(0:55\)](#)

**MOLLY:** We were talking about you. Jeff, the dude that leads VIA Transit. I feel like you should change your title to the dude leads.

**JEFFREY:** (dramatic voice) The dude that leads.

**MOLLY:** (dramatic voice) Jeffrey Arndt, the dude that leads. You, sir, are enjoyable, number one, let's start there. We can sit around and chat about Broadway Musicals which is my favorite. But separately from that, how long have you been at VIA?

**JEFFREY:** Almost eight years now. [\(1:27\)](#)

**MOLLY:** Okay, so you've been with them for almost a decade. So, nearly as long as the Community Vision has been there. You are, you came to us from Houston.

**JEFFREY:** Correct.

**KIRAN:** Wait a minute.

**MOLLY:** Uh oh.

**KIRAN:** Jeff, you and I both went to Notre Dame.



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**JEFFREY:** Yes! What dorm were you in?

**KIRAN:** Oh, I went for grad school. Wait a minute, what did you study?

**JEFFREY:** Civil engineering.

**KIRAN:** Oh, different.

**MOLLY:** Oh man. (1:51)

**JEFFREY:** Isn't that really fascinating?

**MOLLY:** (KIRAN laughs) That is! (talking to KIRAN) Shame, you were almost civil engineering. What was it?

**KIRAN:** I studied Peace Studies.

**MOLLY:** Yes, so Peace Studies. Civil Engineering. Almost the same thing.

**KIRAN:** Thank you for not laughing. People laugh when I tell them.

**MOLLY:** No, of course not. (KIRAN laughs)

**JEFFREY:** My mind kept saying, what exactly could that be?

**MOLLY:** Yeah, yeah. Exactly. It's sort of the same.

**KIRAN:** They put us off campus. It felt like a mile, which means I walked a mile in the snow for grad school.

**MOLLY:** What year was that? (KIRAN laughs) 1902?

**JEFFREY:** Well, I confess that I was the first co-ed class, and I was in the same class as Rudy.

**MOLLY:** (shocked) No, you were not!

**JEFFREY:** *The Rudy.*

**KIRAN:** Stop it!

**MOLLY:** We could sit here and say, "Rudy, Rudy!"



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**JEFFREY AND MOLLY:** Rudy! Rudy!

**MOLLY:** Oh my goodness. No way. That's your claim to fame. We are going to cut the podcast there. (KIRAN and JEFFREY laugh) That's it.

**KIRAN:** I'm sorry I brought it up. [\(2:40\)](#)

**MOLLY:** Well done, Jeff. It's over. (KIRAN laughs) Oh my gosh, what a small world.

**KIRAN:** Yeah, that's very cool.

**MOLLY:** Yeah, that's enjoyable.

**KIRAN:** I am curious about that then. Have you always cared about public transportation? [\(2:55\)](#)

**JEFFREY:** Well, I grew up in a small Indiana town, not far from South Bend. Very small. That has never seen a bus, except one on a toll road. We were a small town. We had no transit service what so ever. Later, they introduced the paratransit service, like our VIA Transit service. My father, who was on dialysis for a period of time, would use the paratransit service. I grew up in a town where there was no thought of transit. You were in South Bend. You know that the South Bend system, at least when I was there, was very meager. We took the bus into downtown to see The Exorcist when it came out, but there were no buses running back to campus, so we had to hitchhike back after watching that movie. [\(3:43\)](#)

**MOLLY:** No what are you doing! No! Don't hitchhike after The Exorcist.

**JEFFREY:** But I was in Civil Engineering without any, Notre Dame didn't require you go into any specialty like structural or concrete or whatever, so I went into transportation really based on the fact that there were jobs.

**MOLLY:** Okay, it was a growing industry.

**JEFFREY:** Right. When I first graduated, I was a traffic engineer. Very traditional, you would do sort of what TCI does.

**MOLLY:** Sure, the Transportation and Capital Improvements people just making the traffic go.

**JEFFREY:** I worked traffic signals. I would love to be able to work the ones here, but that's another story. (KIRAN and MOLLY laugh)

**MOLLY:** Different. That's a different conversation.



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**JEFFREY:** But when I was in Houston with that company, Houston Metro had just formed up in '79, and I came into Houston at that time. They were really trying to staff up because they had a very small staff. After having consulted for a few years and written reports, and they go to the cities, and you never knew what was going to happen with them, you know, it was like I had this desire where I could be in a place that I could actually do the things that I thought about.

**MOLLY:** Right, where you could see them happen. [\(4:57\)](#)

**JEFFREY:** And this was a growing part of Houston, so I went to work for Houston. I was originally, I built park and ride lots because that fit my civil engineering background. It was a very young organization; no silos had been built yet.

**KIRAN:** Wow.

**MOLLY:** I love that so much.

**KIRAN:** What is this magic you speak of?

**MOLLY:** What? No silos?

**JEFFREY:** So, you could move in that organization. I was not, "Oh, he's the Civil Engineer that designs park and rides." So, I got to go into planning. I got to go in finance. I got to go into marketing. Then, I finally went into operations, which is where my heart was. So, that was kind of the buildup. There were times when I think about, shoot, if I stayed in the traffic and highway side, it would've been such a different resource environment. A completely different resource environment. Not to go into the detail, but there were elements of growing up that made me really, really furiously wanting to defend people who were bullied and didn't have opportunity. If you think in terms of the spectrum of transportation, who would be the champion of those people? It's a transit system. Transit systems really started out as a service for people who didn't have a car. Now, we want to see it be something more than that. That's really something I keep thinking, I'm glad I didn't do highways. I'm glad I didn't do because I've been able to make really big impacts on people's lives who *need* to be given opportunity. That's the drive. [\(6:47\)](#)

**MOLLY:** We've talked about this, too. That like transit, the conversation between transit and equity, and the idea of if you cannot get to where you need to go, that it stops you from healthcare, jobs, and education, and how public transit is such an opportunity to get you where you need to go.

**JEFFREY:** In fact, I always say VIA is not a bus company. We are a connector to opportunities. That's what we are.



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**KIRAN:** Yeah, it seems so obvious when you say it, and we lay it out the way that we do. It's so profound that you as a leader are so centered in this idea of being a connector, and buses being lifelines. It's immensely powerful.

**MOLLY:** Typically, once in every podcast, there's a moment when we are like, can we sit in that a minute? We realize nobody actually wants for us to sit in silence and contemplate something for a second, but the idea that you as the person who leads VIA Transit, sits so squarely in this is an opportunity to connect people. When you moved to San Antonio from Houston, was the intention "Hey, I'm going to VIA Transit"? What was it that compelled you to come here? [\(8:04\)](#)

**JEFFREY:** Well, I had retired from Houston Metro after 25 years, and I went to work at Texas Transportation Institute—Texas A&M now, Texas A&M Transportation Institute. Wonderful research organization, but again I was back to not doing. I was into studying and learning and helping small urban and rural systems. That was what I really liked again. It was always like that part. Well, the Deputy CEO position opened here in San Antonio. I was called by a recruiter. At the time, I was working with a private bus company and said, "I'm loving this company. I'm loving this job. I have absolutely no interest in doing anything else." And he said, "Well, are you ever interested in getting back into the industry per say?" Oh, absolutely. Well, you know, there's only four cities in Texas. If you want to stay in Texas, there's four cities: Houston, Dallas, Austin and San Antonio. And they have limited opportunities, so if you're really interested, you need to jump on any opportunity, which was very smart of him.

**MOLLY:** Yes, he recruited hard. He did the right thing. [\(9:22\)](#)

**JEFFREY:** He did a good job. So, I came here. I interviewed with Keith Parker, who was the CEO at the time. I came in as his Deputy.

**MOLLY:** In San Antonio and Bexar County, we have had a transit crisis. Our mobility in San Antonio between complete streets, and sidewalks, and cars, we are putting 105 cars in the street every day. Our community is one of the fastest, growing cities in the United States. When we look at the vision, the Community Vision, and we said we want effective and efficient transit, which helps us walk, ride, or wheel anywhere in the community. We've seen over the course of the last years, we just can't seem to turn that dial. We know that we are putting things into place that are making that better. I want to talk a little bit about the pressure of a public transit space in a community that has said we definitely want to be better at multi-modal transit opportunities. The type of, I hesitate to put this on you, but the pressure of that space as a leader of that space. Talk to us a little bit about that. [\(10:40\)](#)

**JEFFREY:** Well, you know, first of all, we take what we do as a profoundly almost a religion. I feel that way. I know how important that is, the customers that use VIA today, how important that is. I'm reading the book *The Fifth Discipline*. It talks a great deal about system-thinking, of thinking more broadly. What we are doing right now is kind of that. So, this community made a



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decision back in the mid to late '70s to create an MTA. The state authorized that. The state authorized the cities that were permitted to tax themselves up to 1 cent of sales tax additional. San Antonio was the first MTA in the state, but we went for a half a cent. I got to believe the mindset in 1977 about transit could be, what mobility could be, is quite different than what it is today. At that time, the feeling was probably half a cent is enough to do what it needs to do. But half a cent is not enough to do what it needs to do today. Systems thinking says when something happens, we often put a band aid on it, but we haven't really addressed systematically what's happening. How do we know? Because about five years later, we have to find another band aid. So, if you think about our freeway system, not just San Antonio, I always go to Houston, right. So, Houston, Katy Freeway, they invested \$2.8 Billion to make it the largest freeway in America, which by definition makes it the universe. I can't imagine anywhere else having a larger freeway.

**MOLLY:** There might be. We haven't seen all the planets, but maybe. [\(12:30\)](#)

**JEFFREY:** (MOLLY and KIRAN agreeing throughout) So, they spent that money, and five years later, it was taking longer to get to Katy to Downtown than before they started construction. So, I asked somebody, what are you thinking? They had basically taken the right of way. When you open a door to an office, you step onto frontage road almost. It's very tight. "Well, we are thinking about narrowing lanes." It's always that same thing. It doesn't fix anything, and it never will. It never has. So, we think that we are part of a system that doesn't necessarily become their solution, but an alternative. I don't know if we'll ever get away from congestion, but we think we can be a realistic part of providing real options, so that even if you had a car, there would be at least trips where you thought you could just take the bus. Our challenge, so let me go back because I remember when I first came here, and I went to a SA2020 thing, and we were looking at the goal, I looked at the goal, and I believe our goal was that we should triple ridership. I looked at folks, and I said, but we don't have a penny more than what we started with. So, how are we going to triple? There would be ways if you eliminated all the service that went out 410 and put it in here, you might be able to. But think about this, you live inside 410, but all these jobs are popping out in 1604. You've got to get there. So, that doesn't really help either. So, we have to be broad enough. We can't do that with our current half-cent. Our current chair, Rey Saldana—

**MOLLY:** We are mild fans. Just a little bit. [\(14:20\)](#)

**JEFFREY:** You should be. He rode the system for a month as we all know. Didn't use a car, came back and said the biggest dilemma is frequency. The biggest dilemma of that is dollars. If I had the dollars to run more frequent service, I would want to run more frequent service because if real estate is location, location, location... transit is frequency, frequency, frequency. That's what attracts people. So, he was able to sell City Council on sending VIA \$10 million a year in order to enhance frequency on about 18 bus routes. Let me just to tell you, when you get your service to every 10-12 minutes because I call that the sweet spot. You don't look at a schedule



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anymore. When we did that on routes that were running 15-20 minutes, not even all that bad. It's not like they went from an hour to 10. We saw ridership increases like 26%, 26%. Now, that's when you can start saying, "okay, we can see you could really generate increased ridership if you could build a high frequency network." [\(15:28\)](#)

**MOLLY:** We know that the SA2020 Green Dividend shows, if we all drove 1 mile less per day, we could generate \$200 per person in our San Antonio metro region. So, we would save \$200 per person, if we could drive one mile less per day. In some cases, we talk about maybe that is instead of taking my car to all my meetings, maybe I drive to work, and then I use the bus to get to my meetings for the rest of the day, and I use my car to get home. I would be curious, too, Jeff, as a guy who understands it as a connector, there are also just things that we know about getting on the bus or utilizing public transit that makes for a better community. The other day I was listening to Marina Gavito, who is one your Board Members, who said, "You cannot not create a relationship when you're sitting next to somebody." There's something about community building when you're on a bus, but we also know too, that if we are increasing our public transit use, then we are also helping environmental resource navigation. We start cutting down on emissions. We are then helping in health. We know that VIA now is offering free rides to UTSA, SAC, and just Alamo College students, generally.

**JEFFREY:** Incarnate Word and Our Lady of the Lake. [\(16:55\)](#)

**MOLLY:** And we know, from multiple conversations from students and surveys, transit, having legitimate, "I *need* public transit. I need a way to get to my school," was a barrier somehow. So, there are so many things we are noticing now.

**JEFFREY:** That's really a nexus. I think we take great strides. We find ways you don't have to pay tuition to go to Alamo Colleges, but we don't stop to think how to get there and how to get back. And the person who can't afford tuition can probably not afford a car and to park a car. So, it's a very, affordable housing, and where it's located.

**KIRAN:** Childcare, books.

**JEFFREY:** Absolutely. Absolutely. I have to tell you a story because it kind of goes to this.

**MOLLY:** Please. [\(17:44\)](#)

**JEFFREY:** I was at the second Bibliotech on a Saturday morning, and a young man came up to me and said I just want to thank you for VIA. Then, of course, I get all embarrassed because I am not VIA. (KIRAN and MOLLY laugh) There are a lot of people who are VIA.

**MOLLY:** You're not doing it all by yourself?!



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**KIRAN:** Wait a minute! (18:00)

**JEFFREY:** I can't take credit for VIA, but I recognize that I am representing VIA, so I take a deep breath. He told me a story. "I've ridden the bus all my life. My mom was a single parent. I understand when I was a baby, she would take me wherever I was cared for, and then I later took it to school. She took it to work. But once I was in school, she went back to school herself. She got her Bachelor's, and then her Master's, and then she got her Doctorate." I went (shocked noises)! "And she rode the bus all that time." She rode the bus in order to do that. Now, she has her Doctorate, and she bought a car. I said, "it happens to the best of us." (MOLLY laughs) Now, he also that he was about to start graduate school. So, think of the impact that had on her life and his life, that's what really, whenever I speak to our Operators because they're the frontline, I just remind them, and most of them are more aware than I am, I just feel compelled to remind them that what you're doing is sometimes lifeline. A VIA Trans driver that is taking someone to dialysis can't get much more important than that. So, yeah, it's very important. (19:21)

**KIRAN:** We were recently just in conversation with Paula Gold-Williams, who talked to us about being a first-generation college graduate and taking the bus to school, and thinking to herself, "Oh, what would it look like if I just didn't go to school right now. Maybe, I just get a job immediately, so I can get a car. It's too hard." But persevered through that and spoke about the support she received from the institution as well in order to graduate. Another perfect example of what you're describing. I know in these individual stories there's so much inspiration to find in this work, which is critical because when we talk about the complex community challenges that is mobility and transit it can feel so overwhelming. I wonder then, as the person who leads VIA, what are the things the organization is doing now, that you are most excited about and can point to and say, "we are doing the thing. We are moving the needle, and I know we can get there."? (20:16)

**JEFFREY:** Okay, so recent past, some of the things we've done in the recent past, so environmentally we replaced most of our diesel fleet with compressed natural gas buses. From a NOX perspective, and NOX is the element that leaves us to be in a nonattainment zone, from a NOX perspective, those CNG buses emit 97% less NOX than the vehicles they replaced. Now, they are not the final step because I believe when those buses get replaced, we are likely go into all electric or fuel cell. There will be zero emission vehicles, but that's a step. In order to do that, we had to build the largest CNG fueling station in North America on San Pedro.

**MOLLY:** Maybe in the universe. (21:00)

**JEFFREY:** (ALL laughing) Maybe! We haven't checked that out. So, you know, very proud of our buses that our red on the outside and green on the inside, as we say. I'm really proud of the fact that we have taken a really aggressive step on passenger amenities. So, we've been installing at a rate of 250 new bus shelters a year, on top of what we had. So, in the last five



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years, we've doubled bus shelters. Today, 95% of the people who board a bus are boarding at a sheltered location. 95% that's almost unheard of. In fact, we have more shelters here than Houston has on the streets or Los Angeles has on the streets. [\(21:47\)](#)

**MOLLY:** I want to pause there and have you say that again. I feel like you, you know, I have had a moment about bus shelters. If you are sitting outside, you should have a shelter waiting for a bus. I want you to say again, for the course of the last five years, you have doubled the amount of bus shelters than previously in just five years. You have planned out that will continue?

**JEFFREY:** We are probably reaching a point of diminishing return, which you are always going to do. What I will say is that there are some stops that we want to put shelters at, but they have physical barriers, or we need land from the adjacent property owner. Of course, those are going to take a lot longer, but we are pursuing that. Those high pay off locations.

**MOLLY:** Where people are using. Got it.

**JEFFREY:** So, really proud of that. I'm really proud of the fact, and thankful, so I'm proud and thankful that the city saw their way to sending us \$10 million. I'm proud the investment made, and over the past eight years, we opened up three Primo routes, which in other cities they'd call rapid transit. We recognize that there is an element of rapid transit that is not present with the Primo routes but will be present in our future plan. None the less, we opened three bus rapid transit lines—two of them this year—Zarzamora and Southwest Military. We've opened facilities like the Stone Oak Park & Ride, which one they complete the construction up there, it will be far more successful. We just opened a Transit Center at Brooks—

**MOLLY:** I just went on a tour of Brooks, and they're sort of preparing to make that its town square center. [\(23:36\)](#)

**JEFFREY:** Yes, we've done a lot with technology. We have the app and all that. I think the thing I'm most proud of in technology that is today, if you are taking VIA Trans, you can go on your phone, and you can track your vehicle much like Uber. So, it used to be we would give you a half an hour window, and you had to be ready at the beginning of the window, and some folks would wait at the curbside. "I'm ready. I'm here." Then, the vehicle would arrive 20 minutes later, still in the window, but you're sitting there for 20 minutes. Now, you don't have to sit out there. Hopefully, you can be in an air-conditioned environment in the summer, and you can watch as the vehicle arrives. So, that is a great application of technology. The other really innovative application of technology is what we are doing on the Northeast side with VIA Link.

**MOLLY:** Oh, yeah. This is new. This is a pilot. [\(24:29\)](#)

**JEFFREY:** It's a pilot, but very exciting pilot. I tell the story that in '85 in Houston, we were all talking about, "we got the core served. Now we need to expand." The suburbs are so hard to



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serve because the streets are noncontinuous, and development is not very dense, and often the communities are gated. So, even if you lived next to the bus route, you would have to walk a long way around to get there. All these things. Buses just don't work there, and there's these mashing of teeth and ringing of hands, and it was industry wide. And then what the industry did for the following 30 years was put 40-foot buses in the suburbs. So, we had bad news and good news. The good news: we were right. It doesn't work. The bad news is we were right, it doesn't work. (KIRAN and MOLLY laugh) So, now we have, we are testing, piloting, something that can be very effective. I think it would be, the easiest way to describe it, general population VIA Trans. Or the other way to think about it, is it's almost like VIA's Uber. So, there's an app. If you live within this 17-mile service area, you use this app or you call and book a trip. It's very much like Uber. It will send you back the license number, the name of the driver, and the make of the vehicle, and it should tell you what time that vehicle will be there. Again, you can follow it and about what time you'll be dropped off. When you're dropped off, it will come back and ask you to rate the driver. Very similar app. So, the advantages, the area where we put, we were running three bus routes, but each only once an hour. So, now, you can take that VIA Link service anywhere in the 17 square mile service area. At the southern tip of that, there is a Naco Pass point where you can then connect to the main line bus service. [\(26:23\)](#)

**MOLLY:** To take you somewhere else?

**JEFFREY:** Yes. It's far more flexible, and we are using vans. We contract the service. We are using vans that are far more in scale with a suburban—

**MOLLY:** You have to put a giant bus down my street. (KIRAN and MOLLY laugh)

**JEFFREY:** So, you know, that's another thing I'm excited we are doing.

**MOLLY:** We like to end every podcast with a call to action. I realize, I'm assuming, that one call to action is, "Hey, we need more than half a cent." (ALL laugh) Let me just guess that might be one of them. If somebody's listening to the podcast, and they're like, "Hey, I've learning a little bit about VIA," What do you want them to do? [\(27:03\)](#)

**JEFFREY:** Well, I want them to reimagine VIA. VIA of 2010, and the VIA of 2030 are... I'll use a comparison they're a kitten and a lion. They're both cats, but they are different cats. It's completely different world than we have today. The second thing I'll say is, as you become familiar with VIA reimaged, you will hear I'm certain the discussion of funding raised because that half cent we have is fully dedicated to what we are running today, and we will need the support of voters for whatever that may be. [\(27:44\)](#)

**MOLLY:** If there's a place that we'll envision what could be, it might be San Antonio, I think. As we move into what our future might look like, I love that you're sort of like, "Hey, imagine what our future transit could look like."



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**KIRAN:** and see yourself in it.

**MOLLY:** Jeff, thanks so much for doing this.

**JEFFREY:** Oh, thank you.

**MOLLY:** I appreciate you coming on and letting us know what's happening, and also how somebody can just jump on board, see how it works for you, and if it doesn't, they call your cell. Is that how it works? They just call your cell?

**JEFFREY:** Well, there is a number. There is a number. (ALL laugh)

**MOLLY:** I appreciate it so much. Everything you heard about today is at [klrn.org/thestorygoes](http://klrn.org/thestorygoes). We will make sure to link all the VIA Reimagined stuff there as well. Thanks!

**JEFFREY:** Thank you so much! Both of you.

**MOLLY:** Frequency, frequency, frequency. [\(28:32\)](#)



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