

Project: Trash Talk: Workers in Vermont's Changing Waste Management Industry

Narrator: David Orr

Interviewer: Virginia Nickerson

Date: July 12, 2019

Place: Cab of Mr. Orr's garbage truck, parking lot of Triple T Trucking, Brattleboro, VT

Transcribed by: Teresa Bergen

00:00

Nickerson: All right. So this is Ginger Nickerson. And I am interviewing Mr. David Orr at Triple T—

Orr: Trucking.

Nickerson: Triple T Trucking of Brattleboro, Vermont. And we are actually sitting in the cab of his truck. And today is July—

Orr: Twelfth.

Nickerson: --twelfth, 2019. So can you tell me what year and what town you were born in?

Orr: I was born 1971 in Brattleboro, Vermont.

00:46

Nickerson: Okay. And what is your current job?

Orr: Truck driver/trash man.

Nickerson: And how long have you been in this line of work?

Orr: Twenty, over twenty years.

01:06

Nickerson: Yeah? And how did you get involved in this work?

Orr: I got involved in this with my dad when I was six years old, on his truck. And I've just kind of grown with it over the years.

01:22

Nickerson: So can you tell me about your dad's business?

Orr: He started off with a pickup. Then he went to a one-ton dump truck. From there he grew into a packer with dumpsters. And he got to a certain point where you either had to do it fulltime or give it up. And he ended up giving it up.

Nickerson: So he started out just hauling trash part time.

Orr: Right.

01:51

Nickerson: So what was he doing the rest of the time?

Orr: He worked a fulltime job at Kingsbury Machine Tool. Fifty-five hours a week. Did the trash part-time.

02:01

Nickerson: So when you were six, what were you doing with your dad?

Orr: I would help with the dumpsters. Or if we had hand stops, help throw the stuff in the back. Take the barrels back. If he dumped the barrel, I'd take it back to the garage, to the homeowner, and put it in the garage.

Nickerson: At six years old!

Orr: Yeah.

02:24

Nickerson: Wow. What did you think of doing that work then?

Orr: I thought it was great. You met a lot of people. You got out socializing. It was good.

02:37

Nickerson: Yeah. And then you had your own route at one point, too, right?

Orr: Yes.

Nickerson: So can you tell me about that? How you started that?

Orr: I had gone through a divorce. I was working fulltime running a dump truck. And I needed a little extra income, so I started a trash route and developed it into what was a pretty good route with dumpsters and two rear load packers. And then we ended up with a town contract and grew that. And we had that four years. The middle brother wanted to get out. He wasn't happy. We were too big, too this, too that, whatever. And so we ended up selling to Triple T.

03:26

Nickerson: So you did that route with your two brothers?

Orr: Yes. Yes. We sold the Triple T in 2005. And I've been with Triple T ever since.

03:42

Nickerson: Yeah. And when you had your own business, how many trucks did you have?

Orr: Three total.

03:51

Nickerson: And did you enjoy doing that work?

Orr: I did. Working for yourself versus working for somebody else is rewarding. But with everything being as expensive as it is in today's world, working for somebody else, having health insurance, 401, and vacation time is a great big thing. It's a great big thing.

04:24

Nickerson: At your biggest when you had your business, how many customers did you have?

Orr: I think at our biggest point, we were up to 300.

Nickerson: Oh my gosh!

Orr: We had over a hundred dumpsters out at that point.

Nickerson: So you were doing both commercial and residential.

Orr: Yes.

04:45

Nickerson: What was the name of your business?

Orr: Orr Brothers Disposal.

Nickerson: And did you just do trash? Or were you also doing—

Orr: We had recycling in our town contract. We did offer a little bit locally. We didn't out of town, because it was just too hard to coordinate, get everything coordinated.

05:14

Nickerson: So, can you remind me what year did you come over to Triple T?

Orr: Two thousand five.

Nickerson: Two thousand and five. And now one of your brothers—

Orr: He's been with the company almost ten years now.

05:31

Nickerson: And what does he do?

Orr: He runs a rear load recycle truck, and he's recently trained in front load and covering routes. Which is a big step, a big step for the company. It gives us somebody that can cover routes that, you know, can take notes and have knowledge and look back and say yeah, I can do this.

05:58

Nickerson: Can you tell me more about what does that mean, covering routes?

Orr: When there's a vacation, somebody's got to cover the route.

Nickerson: So it's like being a substitute driver.

Orr: Yes.

06:09

Nickerson: Got you. So I got to ride along with you today for one of your shorter days, not one of your longer days. So I got to see some of what you were doing. And I realize you probably don't have any day that's a typical day. But if you did, could you describe what a day might be like from when you show up here in the morning, like what time you come to what you're doing through the day? What are the different steps that you go through?

Orr: Well, we start the day out, we get here, check the truck out, make sure everything's all set, we're good to go. And then—

07:00

Nickerson: And what time do you come?

Orr: I'm here between 4:30 and five o'clock in the morning. Try to be out of here by 5:30 on the road. Certain days you've got to be out earlier to obviously get caught up, depending on the

number of extras and what the day looks like. Typically you try to get your first load in by ten o'clock in the morning and go from there [meaning when he dumps the truck at the recycling or transfer station]. It varies on traffic, and who's parked in the way. Or if you've got to wait for somebody. And there is some variations in different areas. But it all equals out in the long run.

07:47

Nickerson: And so you're picking up dumpsters and trashcans. And then can you talk about where you take them?

Orr: Most all the trash comes to Brattleboro. Everything we do in the Keene, New Hampshire area stays in the city transfer setup. Everything else we cover, other than Keene, comes back to Brattleboro to our facility.

08:22

Nickerson: Yeah. And so, and you mostly stay on the New Hampshire side of the river?

Orr: Yes. Yes. I do all New Hampshire. That's my primary thing.

08:37

Nickerson: So can you talk about some of the challenges of doing curbside pickup?

Orr: What are you looking for there?

Nickerson: Oh, just—

Orr: Curbside pickup versus backing into a driveway saves you about eight minutes. You're bing, bing, bing, bing, done. You can go right down the street and it's boom, boom, boom, boom. Where you've got to stop, as you saw today, you've got to stop, wait for traffic, pull out, back in. But the time you do that, you could have already done four or five stops. It's much faster. It's much faster.

09:28

Nickerson: And what are some other challenges to this job? Things that people might not think about or understand?

Orr: If you have a dumpster, having stuff right tight to it, so you've got to walk around that to hook the cable up [is a challenge]. [When people do] Not shoveling the snow away from them so you can get into them, or you've got to pull them out, you've got to shovel the snow anyway just to move them. Simple little things that can slow you down. Can add 15, 20 minutes to a half an hour a day, to your day. Traffic. The biggest thing, first thing in the morning there's no traffic. You can start and go. When you get into the rush hour traffic, beginning of the day traffic, that slows you down a little. As you saw coming out of Keene this afternoon, that traffic was much

heavier than it was this morning. Much heavier. Other than that, I don't know what more I can tell you as far as going faster or slower.

10:44

Nickerson: So what time of day do you typically end?

Orr: I'm generally done four, 4:30, unless it's a really long day or a lot of extras.

10:58

Nickerson: Wow. So you start at between 4:30 and 5:30 in the morning, [and end at 4 or 4:30 in the afternoon].

Orr: Average twelve hours a day. We average 55 to 60 hours a week.

11:08

Nickerson: Yeah. And how many miles do you average a day?

Orr: A hundred and twenty-five to a hundred and fifty. It's always over a hundred.

11:25

Nickerson: And can you tell me about the recycling center where you bring the trash?

Orr: They accept cardboard, paper, newspaper, trash, and they're open from seven till three. And they will not let you in until it's seven o'clock in the morning. And 3:01, they're all gone home. (Nickerson laughs) It's just a given up there. They don't have any overtime. It's eight hours, and that's it.

11:54

Nickerson: So what happens if you show up at 3:01 with a full truck?

Orr: They don't get your trash. It goes back to Brattleboro. (laughs)

12:04

Nickerson: Has that ever happened to you?

Orr: Oh, yeah. I've broke down a couple of times. It's had to come back to Brattleboro.

12:13

Nickerson: So, yeah, so can you tell me about the truck that you drive?

Orr: It's a 2006 Freightliner. I got it Memorial Day of 2005. No, excuse me, I got it Memorial Day of 2006. It had 275,000 miles on it when I got it. It's currently got 350,000. And with the exception of two other guys, I've put all the miles on. They've just covered vacations a couple of times here and there. So it's been an interesting 14 years.

13:03

Nickerson: Yeah. Yeah. What's the hardest part of the job, or your least favorite part of the job?

Orr: The summertime with the smell. The summertime when it's really humid and the smell. That really, that just doesn't turn my crank too much. The wintertime, I don't have a problem with it, you can't smell it anyway in the wintertime. But summertime does have its positives, because you're not slippery, sliding around or stuck. But it also has the negative of the heat and the smell. Other than that, it's just a pretty simple job to do.

13:56

Nickerson: Yeah. And what's your favorite part of the job, or the best part?

Orr: Christmastime. Getting rewarded from the customers. Getting that Christmas card that said, "You did a great job for us this year. Come back and do it again next. We'd like to keep you on another year." (laughs) The positive feedback from the customers, it's worth, it's priceless. It's worth more than any money you could ever make. Because you're appreciated. The level of appreciation is pretty high. That's worth a lot.

14:37

Nickerson: Yeah. Do you have any customers you have special relationships with?

Orr: Most of them. They all know me by first name. And I've known most of them, they've known me all my life.

Nickerson: Oh, really?

Orr: Yeah. A lot of the customers I have, not so much in Keene, but yeah, there's a few in Keene that do, too, know me most of my life. So it's nice knowing a lot of people, having that relationship level of security.

15:23

Nickerson: Yeah. I noticed as we were driving around, and we drove over a hundred miles today, that there were a lot of people on the road who were waving to you.

Orr: They know me. Between the trash company and the fire department, I'm well known.

15:45

Nickerson: Yeah, so you work these super long days. And then you were telling me about some other things that you've done, or that you do in your life. So can you tell me about some other jobs that you've had?

Orr: I worked on a dairy farm for 29 [years]. I've milked, spread manure, planted corn, haying, done a lot of haying. I've run dump truck for oh, about two years, right after I was divorced. And that was interesting. That was kind of a crazy point in life. But it was interesting and it was fun.

16:46

Nickerson: How was running the dump, what were you putting in the dump truck, how was that different from the garbage business?

Orr: We were moving sand and gravel. One area we were building roads. We hauled a lot of [unclear] gravel and built roads and stuff in this area. It was interesting. But that's a seasonal type thing. That doesn't go all year. Where trash business and farming is year round. You have your different seasons, and it's kind of nice. Being outdoors, not stuck in a shop, has its rewards. You get to see deer and other animals that you wouldn't see if you were in a building.

17:47

Nickerson: Do you want to tell me about the other things that you did on your evenings this week after you were done with your 10 and 14-hour days?

Orr: We had Scout meeting, Wednesday night we had Scout meeting. Thursday night we had Fire Department Association meeting. The Scout meeting wasn't too bad. That was a little longer than the association meeting. But other than that, oh, we had chiropractor Monday night, which we have every other Monday. But it's just an average, everyday week.

18:39

Nickerson: And how long have you been with the volunteer fire department?

Orr: Over 20 years. This will be my 21st year this year.

18:50

Nickerson: Yeah. What do you do with the fire department?

Orr: I'm a driver, pump operator. I did make lieutenant a year and a half ago. I am second lieutenant, which means I can get on a fire scene and have command. And basically bark orders, and have the guys do it. It takes quite a skill to get to that point. The chief's got to have a lot of confidence in you to hand you a radio and say, "You can do this." And then they've got the

confidence. Two house fires last year, I had water supply all by myself. And they didn't think a 300-pound man could run. But they found out otherwise. In full turnout gear with four-inch hose, I was on a dead run. And I had the water supply at 653 to 4-inch laid, set up on the truck, and I drafted out of the lake in three and a half minutes.

Nickerson: Wow.

Orr: And we had pump problems, but we got through the pump problems and we got them water and we kept the water going, even though we had pump problems.

20:12

Nickerson: So it sounds like you're used to working really hard under all kinds of hard conditions.

Orr: Yup. Yup.

Nickerson: It's very, very impressive. You talked a little bit about how Triple T is looking to hire some more drivers.

Orr: Yeah.

Nickerson: Can you talk about what that kind of means for the folks on the crew?

Orr: Well, it would take some of the pressure off to have a couple more guys that could actually go out and do this would be great. But as you saw today, it takes a person that really wants to do it, and enjoys working with the public. Because it can be a thankless job.

Nickerson: Yeah. Yeah.

Orr: Some of the apartment houses we were at today, you kind of got that idea. Everything's all over the ground, all over everywhere. It makes it interesting. Makes it interesting.

21:42

Nickerson: Yeah. You also talked about, or I asked you about, can you talk about little kids, and how little kids react to your truck?

Orr: (laughs) They think it's great that you can squeeze things up and pack them in tight. They recognize when you're late. And if you've got a different truck, they recognize that real quick. Different features, I guess, are pretty distinctive to them. But it brightens their day when they see the trash man come.

22:24

Nickerson: Yeah. We were driving down one street and that one little boy got so excited seeing you.

Orr: Yeah.

Nickerson: It was pretty cute.

Orr: It's a great reward.

22:37

Nickerson: Do you have, what are you the proudest of about your job?

Orr: Making people happy. Making people happy. You know, getting through the day and seeing people smile. Or somebody will say, "You made my day." You know, or little kids that, "Wow, that's impressive!" You know, and you hope their future could be a future potential trash person.

23:19

Nickerson: Do you have, you know, thinking about that, thinking about how there's kind of a need for more drivers—

Orr: Right.

Nickerson: --and you know, that there are some young kids who are looking at you now and getting excited seeing you, do you have any advice for a young person who might be thinking about becoming a trash person? Like advice for somebody thinking about coming into this line of work.

Orr: Well, think about certain jobs that have layoffs, that are seasonal type thing. And think about something permanent and really where you want to go. Where you want to be. Truck driving can be very rewarding. You get out, you see different parts of the world and different parts of the towns and counties. Just in general with the trash end of it, you're helping people out. It's just amazing. What you're doing and where it goes and what the potential reward is. It may not be financially, it may be a mental reward. It may be just a thank you. Or a, "Hey, you did a great job, I appreciate that." You know, that goes a long ways.

25:03

Nickerson: (laughs) I was thinking about this lady [holds up one of the cans of soda they were given on route earlier in day]

Orr: Ah. And I've got a lady that every other week will give me a couple of sodas. She just thinks it's great and loves to do it. I just appreciate it. Different areas you can be appreciated and it's really good.

25:33

Nickerson: What would you say is different about Triple T as a trash business? Because are they different than some of the other trash businesses in the area?

Orr: Well, it's family-run. You've got that family feeling. And that's big. That's big. The owner takes good care of us. I mean, we're well taken care of. But he knows when we're out there, we're taking care of him. His name's on the truck. We're taking care of him. So it's one hand washes the other. Which there's not enough of that today in this society. There needs to be a little more of that.

26:38

Nickerson: Would you say that this is a risky job, that it's a dangerous job?

Orr: To a point. It's risky to a point. I think it's more risky in curb service because people don't know how to drive. They're in a hurry. They've got to go, go, go, go. And you're in their way, so that's why we wear these fancy flashy vests now, that are a complete pain. You get caught on stuff. I've ripped, well these are actually ones I've bought, because the ones the company bought, they weren't big enough for me. They weren't the XL. They were large. And I take two X. And I wanted one with a pocket. So this is mine. I've gone through two of these. Getting caught on angle line or something, or it snags on the dumpster or something, and it rips, tears, it's junk. I think that's the risky part. Other than that, I don't think there's that much risk.

28:05

Nickerson: All right. Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you would want the public to know about, that you'd want people to know about your job and what you do?

Orr: I enjoy what I do. I've done it for a long time. I'm going to continue to do it as long as I can. I try to do a good job. I'm not super-fast, but I get the job done. Sometimes that's better than super-fast.

Nickerson: Great. All right. Well, I think that's it, Mr. Orr.

Orr: Very good. This has been enjoyable. And good luck.

Nickerson: Thank you so much for letting me ride along with you and for the interview!

Orr: Not a problem.

29:01 [End Interview.]