

**F**oxy Travel/ FTI Coach of Linwood, Massachusetts is located only a few miles northeast of the corner where Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island meet. It was founded as and continues to be a family operation of the Menard family for nearly four decades. Bus operations originally replaced an auto maintenance shop and a beauty parlor but today can boast being the only independently-owned, full-service travel agency in the Blackstone Valley as well as the bus company that recently brought the traditional silversides look to the MCI J4500.

### Early History

Like so many other bus operations, Foxy Travel was the outgrowth of an earlier operation for a church group. It all started in 1978 when Donald Menard and three other members of the Knights of Columbus put together a travel club that could rent buses to take them places. Their first trip was a huge success with eight buses taking 250 passengers for a moonlight cruise in North Kingston, Rhode Island.

The club immediately grew in popularity as additional trips and tours were planned. They called themselves the “Foxy Travelers” and the name stuck to the group and the resulting operations. Continued expansion prompted the group to separate from the organization and go on their own. In 1981, Donald took the travel operation to a gas station he owned in Linwood, Massachusetts that was renovated into an office and a gathering place for boarding the tours. Foxy Travel was founded in 1981, incorporated in 1985, and developed into a full-service travel agency.

After chartering buses from other bus companies for years, the decision was made to go into bus operations. Hence, in 1989, Donald took his hat in hand and approached Unibank for a loan to buy a new bus. At first they were hesitant to finance a new bus for a new bus operation. However, one of the bank managers knew that Donald had an impeccable reputation for paying his bills and took steps to make sure that the loan went through.

The new bus carried fleet number 101 and was a 1989 MCI 102A3 with a manual transmission. Hence, anniversaries for the bus operation are based on a founding date of 1989. It is noteworthy that today, 30 years later, Foxy Travel continues to remain loyal to both Unibank and MCI. In 1990, Donald became the sole owner of the company and officially launched FTI Coach.

### A Family Business

As with many small bus companies, Foxy Travel & FTI Coach became a true family business with many family members involved. In the early days, Donald’s father and brother-in-law renovated the gas station, turning it into an office and waiting room. Donald’s wife Christine would frequently ask “Is this the last bus?” but was always pitching in to help. She often said that she was a bus widow because

# 30 Years of Foxy Travel & FTI Coach

by Larry Plachno  
Photos courtesy of FTI Coach



Foxy Travel and FTI Coach are located in Linwood, Massachusetts, which is south of Worcester and a few miles northeast of the corner of Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island. In 2019, FTI Coach celebrates 30 years of coach operations. Founded by Donald Menard, the company remains a family business.



This evening line-up of coaches shows that FTI Coach is getting ready for another major passenger movement. FTI Coach regularly moves sports teams, both local groups as well as major universities that fly their teams into the area. In addition, FTI Coach provides transportation for weddings, proms, local charters and several tour operators.



they would answer the phone 24/7 and Donald would take off running if someone needed help in the middle of the night. Upon retirement, Uncle Dennis, who ran an adjacent car repair garage, transitioned to a full-time bus mechanic to help out.

Donald's son Keith got his traditional start in the bus industry by washing buses outside adjacent to the waiting room and office in all kinds of weather. He "graduated" into operations on a trip to Pembina, North Dakota to pick up 103, a new 102DL3. It was originally supposed to be a father-son bonding trip but soon after leaving the factory they were told that there were problems with an existing coach in the fleet and the new coach was quickly needed for charter commitments. The trip then turned into a marathon to get the new coach home in time.

Keith went off to college at Arizona State University. Upon his return, he became active

with the company and management. He has managed the company for several years and is now the company president. Christine unfortunately passed away in 2016. Donald commented: "This business would not be what it is today were it not for my wife. It was a big loss for the company. Everybody loved her and she was the heart of it."

It is noteworthy that the company is starting to move into a third generation. Keith's teen-aged son Liam now helps out at the bus garage, starting in the usual way by cleaning and washing buses. Keith's wife Christina also serves on the Foxy Travel board of directors while also running her own retirement services business.

#### Facilities

Foxy Travel has always tried to grow slowly but admit that today that they are bursting at the seams and beyond any initial plans they had. At the time that Donald

Menard got involved with Foxy Travel, they owned a gas station with an adjacent beauty salon, operated by Christine. An uncle had a car repair garage on the other side. Donald's brother-in-law and father worked on the gas station to turn it into an office and waiting room. In those early years the buses were washed out in the open between the gas station and beauty salon.

Donald purchased the car repair business and built an adjacent two-bay bus garage to wash and service the coaches. When the fleet got up to 11 coaches, the car repair business was closed and Uncle Dennis began working on buses full time. There is room to park all 11 coaches but if all are in at the same time, it gets tight.

#### The Growing Fleet

Looking back on earlier years, Keith Menard said: "Never in a million years did we think we would own 11 coaches someday." While Donald and family never tried to speed up the process, the company continued to grow because they treated both staff and customers well.

The bus operation was originally founded with a single new 102A3 purchased in 1989 and given fleet number 101. As other coaches were added, the fleet numbers followed in order and FTI continued to buy the traditional MCI models. Coach 103, mentioned earlier, was a 45-foot 102DL3. Today the FTI Coach fleet is all MCI.

Keith relates that they once purchased another brand of coach at an auction for a price they could not refuse. While he says it was a good coach, FTI continued to buy MCI coaches for a good reason. "We realized how valuable the network of MCI owners we had was. It didn't matter where in the country we were, if we had an issue, there was someone who could help. We have also been fortunate to have really good sales people who will work with you to solve your problems, no matter how long ago you bought the coach."

In 1989, the company purchased its first coach, this 1989 MCI 102A3. It was numbered 101 in the fleet and was followed by additional coaches as the company expanded. Today, the FTI Coach fleet consists of 11 MCI coaches.



As time went on FTI Coach moved from the traditional MCI models to the newer J4500 models. They still have one 102DL3 in the fleet that is used for groups on a budget. Five years ago, for the company's 25th anniversary, they wanted to do something special. What they decided to do was to put the names of all the people who have worked with the company for at least 10 years on the side of the coach.

In 2019, they were looking to again do something special for their 30th anniversary. What they came up with is a tribute to their first coach by putting silversiding on the side of their new coach. Only it turned out to be impossible to do because stainless steel siding for the J4500 had never been engineered. Keith worked with Patrick Laffan, their MCI salesman, who brought in Jeffrey Robinson, MCI's graphics designer. After putting their heads together, they decided that they could get the same effect by using vinyl decals on the side of the bus.

When Randy Wilcox, another salesman from MCI, first saw the coach he exclaimed: "There was a time I couldn't give away a steel side bus, and now people are having them put on again." To MCI's credit, the sides are very realistic and even have rivets. You have to get up close to the coach before you realize that it is only a vinyl decal. When the new coach 126 showed up at the bus garage, the siding was a real surprise for Donald Menard and Jozef Donoval. A long-time member of the staff, Josef originally drove coach 101 and is now the driver for the new coach 126. It will be interesting to see whether other bus operators will ask for a retro look on their J4500 coaches.

### Operations

FTI Coach is primarily a charter and tour operator, but they provide a wide range of services to a wide range of customers. It is inter-



The most interesting new addition to the FTI Coach fleet carries fleet number 126. Although a new MCI J4500, the "silversiding" was added to give it a retro look. Although not obvious in this photo, the stainless steel siding appearance was created by an MCI external wrap.

esting that today they continue to run the Foxy Travel motorcoach tours that got them started in this business more than 30 years ago. This time of year, FTI Coach will have coaches out running seven-day New England tours for Collette. They were one of FTI Coach's first customers and continue to return.

Another part of the FTI Coach bus business is inbound sports teams. Working with Anthony Travel, FTI services several teams from Arizona State University (Keith's alma mater), to Notre Dame. In addition, FTI does substantial business in weddings, proms, local sports teams, Boston shuttles, day trips, overnight trips and everything in-between.

Keith pays his staff a compliment by saying that they are professional, flexible, hard working people who always make sure we are providing the finest motorcoach transportation. He continues: "I like to think at 11 coaches, we are big enough to work with most client needs, but also small enough that we can remain focused on the quality product we are putting on the road."

Keith adds: "As anyone in the industry will tell you, it is a lot of work, more hours than you can imagine, but we have been very fortunate to have some great people along the way to help us be in business for 30 years. If you do this business right, even your competitors will be friends." □



Here, number 126 in the FTI Coach fleet is about to depart on a trip for a major tour operator. You have to get up close to the coach before you realize that the stainless steel siding is an external wrap. It was developed by Keith Menard of FTI Coach; Patrick Laffan, their salesman at MCI and Jeffrey Robinson, MCI's graphic designer.



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9698 W. Judson Road • Polo, Illinois 61064

Ph: (815) 946-2341

Fx: (815) 946-2347

[www.busmag.com](http://www.busmag.com)