

KEY FINDINGS



When he was about seven years old, Roderick Coleman was in a Rambler station wagon with his parents when they got stuck in traffic at the Mystic River Drawbridge on Main Street in downtown Mystic. “I was in the back seat and I watched that span go up, and I said, ‘Mom, I want that job some day.’ And she said, ‘If you put your mind to it, you can have anything you want.’”

Some five decades later, Coleman is going on his 28th year operating the iconic bridge. He looks and acts like a man who should operate a bridge: husky, confident, rattling off knowledge and procedures as fluidly as you scroll your mobile apps. With his radiant smile, he projects

an assurance that all is safe and under control.

Tourists strolling the seaport’s sidewalks are drawn like magnets every time the horn signals an opening—forty minutes after the hour. They gawk, mesmerized by the imposing sight of tons of concrete and steel going vertical. “It’s a unique structure,” Coleman says. “This is like our Liberty Bell.”

Coleman’s tenure has no shortage of colorful moments. “Kids on skateboards sometimes try to use the ramp as it’s going down. One time a drunk climbed up on the girders, caught up here on the crossbeam. He was intoxicated.” He managed to climb down on his own and was greeted by a cop who happened to be visiting Coleman in the tower at that time.

KEY DINGS

COMINGS, GOINGS & CHARTINGS



One man, 660 tons of moving concrete

"We had a lady one time smash the gate," Coleman recalls. "She said she'd be back after she got her hair done to take care of this," and drove off.

He's also rubbed elbows with some big names. "Walter Cronkite was a regular. He docked his boat right there" pointing to a spot opposite the control tower. "I used to go over and talk to him. He'd come up here. He was a regular guy."

When former president Jimmy Carter was in town for the christening of a submarine named for him, he stayed across the street at the Whaler's Inn. Coleman got to shake his hand one night and Carter thanked him for keeping the bridge down for his motorcade. "He's the best one I ever met," says Coleman, "because he's a true statesman."

Then there was the day the Khardashian sisters were on the street. "I notice all this commotion," Coleman says. "Then one of their crew knocked on the door and asked can they come up? They wanted to come up and operate the bridge. I said, whoa, they'd hang me for that one. They didn't come up because they couldn't operate the bridge."

As the 10:40 a.m. opening approaches,

Coleman steps up to the windows in his perch above the street and takes a good look in both directions. He also checks the closed circuit video screens to make sure he has a full grasp of the traffic and pedestrians. He counts the boats. Flipping switches, the traffic lights come on and the gates lower. Then the Jersey Barriers go up. He looks out one last time to be sure the bridge is clear, blows the warning horn, then pushes the lift button.

A majestic arc scribed by 660 tons of concrete and steel rises into the blue spring sky. The river gleams with action as the schooner Argia sails through with a school group on an outing. The photo op lasts all of a fleeting few minutes before the icon of Mystic sets back down.

Coleman relishes his responsibility and takes nothing for granted. "The DOT trusts me to operate some of the most expensive equipment that they have. The first thing I do when I come in to work, is I look out that window and enjoy the view. There's a lot of kids in America who don't even get to see stuff like this."

He may just motivate some to follow in his footsteps. "I'm writing a children's book on what it's like to be a drawbridge tender." ●