

# Driving Force

**FedEx Ground contractor Joel Church has mastered the art of delivery.**



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*As an independent contractor for FedEx Ground, Hallsville resident Joel Church still works the routes that were issued to him almost 20 years ago, and they have grown into assets. Routes can sell for anywhere from \$25,000 to \$100,000.*

Joel Church's home address is not marked. There are no street address numbers on his mailbox, nor are there numbers on the front of his home.



Photo by [Gerik Parmele](#)

Joel Church loads his truck at the FedEx sorting facility. Church is a FedEx contractor who owns a fleet of two trucks and operates one of the busiest routes in Columbia.



Photo by [Gerik Parmele](#)

Belt collects a signature after making a delivery.



Photo by [Gerik Parmele](#)

Dave Belt, left, talks to his boss, Joel Church, before they leave to make their deliveries.

It's been nearly 15 years since he's had them, and he acknowledges he's "one of them" — one of those people who just won't take the packaged numbers collecting dust out of his closet and replace the faded ones. Such behavior is common along his two delivery routes in central Columbia — but a FedEx Ground deliverer should know better, he said.

"I hate that," Church said of buildings without identifiable address numbers. "It's on my to-do list. It has been for the past 10 years."

The 50-year-old Hallsville resident and father of two boys has for the past 18 years delivered commercial packages for FedEx Ground as an independent contractor in the Columbia area. The small-business owner has expanded his fleet at every chance, and he is looking to do so again this fall with a third delivery truck that will split his two routes into three.

Drop-offs and pickups are up this spring, he said, and the need to add a truck to his routes is becoming a necessity. With three employees who help work downtown Columbia, the university and colleges, Business Loop 70 and the industrial portion of Route B, Church said he is nearing the situation where he either needs to keep up with the volume of packages or sell his coveted routes.

Such a problem is a good one to have, he said, as he has watched Columbia grow over the years. Rock Bridge High School was isolated when it was first built, he said, and the area of Nifong Boulevard and Grindstone Parkway is evidence of growth and new routes for contractors to purchase and invest in.

Central Columbia and its colleges also have blossomed over the years, he said, which is why the small-business entrepreneur is thinking bigger.

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Church started his career with small couriers in the early '80s and eventually found himself working in lawn care because he enjoyed the work and the independence. In 1992, Roadway Package Systems opened shop in Columbia, and he was hired as the seventh driver and ran the second route in Columbia as it expanded. RPS was bought out by FedEx Ground in 1996.

As the owner of Central North LLC, Church still works the routes that were issued to him almost 20 years ago, and they have grown into assets. He specifically works a Business Loop 70 route that includes stops at Walmart, Sam's Club, Home Depot, Lowe's and other large and small retailers. A second driver, Dave Belt, runs the downtown route and colleges.

"They don't give them away anymore," he said. "I don't know anyone that didn't get in on the ground floor that wouldn't have to pay for a route. Some routes are better than others. Don't know anyone that would be giving a route away today. You can't get into FedEx Ground without buying a route today."

Delivery businesses such as Church's are the heart and soul of FedEx Ground, said Rob Boulware, manager of external communications for FedEx Ground, and many have thrived despite the state of the economy. Gross incomes for FedEx Ground independent contractors range from about \$60,000 to more than \$1 million, and their proprietary delivery routes typically gain equity, he said, with routes selling from \$25,000 to more than \$1 million. Church said he has heard Columbia routes can sell for as high as \$100,000.

As of March 18, FedEx Corp.'s average daily package volume was up 5 percent and year-over-year revenue was up 7 percent, Boulware said. That means that even though the economy continues to lag, many of the nearly 12,000 community-based delivery businesses, such as

Church's, that make up the FedEx Ground delivery network are achieving success and expanding.

With annual revenues of more than \$7 billion, Boulware said, the company's relationship with its thousands of independent small-business owners is a great part of its success.

In Columbia, more than 5,500 packages per day are processed and delivered by 19 contractors, said Brian Avery, senior manager for the FedEx Ground terminal at 2210 Maguire Blvd.

"Thankfully, our owners here thrive in the independent contractor model," he said. "Our contractors work hard to take care of their own issues and don't assume the terminal will cover it. The service here is outstanding. ... These guys manage their own taxes and payrolls. It's a lot more than delivering packages."

As a business owner, Church manages his employees and provides maintenance for his two trucks, but he also must abide to year-to-year service contracts his company holds with FedEx Ground. He is responsible for delivering 99 percent of the packages placed on his truck each day, which amounts to an average of 110 delivery packages daily.

Church said he could pick up an additional 150 packages along his route that go back to the terminal, and his contract with FedEx Ground would not be renewed if the corporation did not approve of his service.

"They call him one of the leaders of the belt," Avery said, referring to the long mechanical belt that carries packages in the morning to loading sites beside the trucks. "I always instruct the new guys to speak to him. He has a great service record, and he typically leaves with the most packages."

Complaints and wrecks also can eat into bonuses assigned to contractors, said Church, who has had five complaints over his 18-year career. He still is waiting for a legitimate complaint, he said, and Avery is proud that Church is one of several drivers at the Columbia terminal who have been accident-free for 16 years.

Because there is no ceiling to how much a contractor can earn, Church said he plans to begin running a supplemental route sometime in the fall that he hopes FedEx Ground will approve. The move would add an additional truck to serve his two areas, which would allow for additional customers and more volume.

"My plan is to get it up and running, approved and then sell all the routes and trucks off and retire in 10 years," he said. "That, of course, can change."

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No day is the same, but there is some organization to the madness of delivering packages to central Columbia.

Church said he arrives each weekday just after 7 a.m. to take care of errands and help load his truck. He and Belt discuss what the day has in store, and they both roll out no later than 8 a.m. after loading their trucks.

On Mondays, Jeff Henry drives Church's truck as Church tends to business-related issues in the terminal and other appointments. From Tuesday through Friday, Henry will fill in for other drivers, and a third employee will fill in for Church during vacations.

"I'm just happy to have a job right now in this economy," Henry said. "Together, we try to treat our customers right, and we get rewarded for it. We try to achieve those top goals. Otherwise, we wouldn't have a job."

On most days, Belt will average 140 packages for delivery, which Church said physically is extremely difficult. Belt said the campus portion of his route is difficult because of the number of stops that require him to climb stairs, wait for elevators and find offices for faculty members with random addresses that read, for instance, "University of Missouri: Engineering Department."

"The students will be out in three weeks," he said. "I'm counting down the weeks left in school because of traffic."

As soon as he pulls out of the terminal, Church said, he turns his radio to country music. At 11 a.m., he switches to Rush Limbaugh's daily show. A St. Louis Cardinals day baseball game is a special treat for the baseball fan, who rides the majority of the day with his door open. "Who has time to shut it?" he said.

Bulk items are delivered first so shelved items can be reached, he said, and a 15- to 20-minute break has crept into his schedule as he has grown older.

"I'm not stuck in an office," Church said. "As long as you are out doing what you are supposed to be doing, no one bothers you. I've always liked that about a job."

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