

The Wonder Bus is back

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After two years away, the Wonder Bus will return to Del Norte County ... new and improved.

The Wonder Bus is a mobile library and resource center that came rolling into the county in 2001. For 16 years, it provided children with resources to prepare for school and to gain a love for literacy.

It has not been in operation since 2017, but now is back this month.

“Really, what it was designed for was to introduce children for love for reading introduce how to properly facilitate literacy circle time, and then it goes beyond that,” said Executive director of Del Norte Child Care Council Melodee Mitchell.

Mitchell still remembers when the bus first came down the streets of Crescent City when she was a brand new employee. She and former executive director of First 5 Del Norte Patty Vernelson stood outside and watched with anticipation as it pulled up.

“I mean, it was like this book mobile, this mobile literacy library was coming to Del Norte County. It was so unique there wasn’t anything like that here,” Mitchell said.

A small cohort wrote the grant to bring the Wonder Bus to Del Norte County in 2001. The grant paid for the bus purchase, the inside renovation, and sixth months of operation. After that first six months it took the whole community to keep the bus in action.

The bus had contributing partners throughout the community who donated funds to keep the bus running, including the library, Del Norte Child Care Council and the City of Crescent City. Throughout the years it changed ownership from the library to the First 5 Del Norte, while Del Norte Child Care Council ran the programming on the bus.

It served the community well for 16 years, bringing a library to smaller towns all over Del Norte County that did not have a library building, but two years ago, they did not know if the bus would run again.

“When the decision for this to possibly be taken off the road or to change... it just brought me to tears. I was like we have to keep this bus on the road,” Mitchell said.

First 5 employees did not think they could keep the bus in operation with its constant need for repairs. Mitchell, Varnelson, current First 5 executive director Angela Glore, among others, created a subcommittee that met for 18 months to decide the future of the Wonder Bus.

In that time, the bus ownership transferred to Mitchell and the Del Norte County Child Care Council, since the programming already came from the council. Mitchell worked diligently to find additional sources of funding and new partners to invest in the future of the bus.

The bus could not run on its own. It takes commitment from local companies such as the Del Norte County Office of Education, Mor-Jon Inc. and Wild Rivers Community Foundation among others are investing in its success.

“The unique thing about the wonder bus is that It really is a community collaboration,” Mitchell said.

With much help, the bus is in working condition and receiving a brand new paint job. The details are getting finalized, and it is set to return to operation in the coming weeks.

“All I can say is when it goes back out on the road and you watch the faces of toddlers, it’s so touching because they’re just thrilled. They’re so excited to see the bus to be on the bus,” said Varnelson. “I mean, kids cry when they leave.”

In this next phase of the bus, it will have two AmeriCorps workers running children’s programs and providing resources for parents and will have regular scheduled stops throughout the county each week. Perhaps the most exciting development is that an anonymous donor has ensured that every child who goes on the bus will leave with a free book, no strings attached.

“I’m just excited I think it’s gonna I think kids are gonna be really thrilled,” Varnelson said.

Families will be able to access many resources to prepare their children for school and will also have the ability to sign up for a library membership card on the bus.

Those who have invested their heart and energy into the bus cannot wait to see it continue operation. They are confident it will continue to bring Del Norte County residents joy and a magical love for learning.