

Profile: Mother and daughter driven to make Fun Bus succeed

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The apple-green converted school bus sums up Dawn McGarry's and Kari Denton's business formula in legends written on the sides: "Fitness fun on wheels" and "Let us bring the fun to you!"

McGarry and Denton are the mother-and-daughter owners of Fun Bus USA. Their bus, containing fitness and athletic equipment, goes to day-care centers, parties, firemen's picnics or anywhere in a five-county area where there are children from 18 months old to about 7 years who need entertainment and exercise.

"Fitness is a big thing now, so why not have fun?" the 52-year-old McGarry said.

The company, based at the 28-year-old Denton's home in Tinton Falls, now serves Monmouth, Middlesex, Somerset, Mercer and Union counties. Its roots go back to a day-care center in Franklin Township, Somerset County, that the two purchased in the summer of 1999.

McGarry, who lives in Woodbridge, brought a background in business and most of the start-up money to the project. She was a mortgage-loan officer for various companies for two decades. Denton brought her training and experience as a third-grade and second-grade teacher in the Perth Amboy and Plainfield school districts.

Denton is married to a Carteret police officer. McGarry's husband, who was Denton's stepfather, died last January.

They bought the Kids Come First day-care center for \$60,000. It had 12 children regularly attending. They managed to increase that number to about 65 children by the time they sold the business for \$220,000 two years later.

McGarry said they did not want to take too much credit for the growth. A lot of it had to do with location, she said. The day-care center was on a corner with a traffic light on heavily-traveled Easton Avenue, near New Brunswick, so a lot of motorists would see their sign every day.

About midway through their second year of operating the center, the two began considering a change.

"We still wanted to be our own bosses, (but) not work so many hours," Denton said. The day-care center was a five-day, 50-hour-a-week grind.

In October 2000, they bought an old school bus for \$1,500 and spent about \$20,000 fixing it up and converting it into a fun and fitness center, with swings, barrels, parallel bars, a balance beam, rings, mats, a slide and a trampoline

Parked at the day-care center, the bus provided another activity for the children. They also booked some birthday parties as an experiment. In a few months, they were booking the bus at other day-care centers and events. By the spring of 2001, they had enough business to sell the day-care center and focus on the Fun Bus as their only venture.

The bus can serve up to about 15 children at a time, and Denton and McGarry or their two part-time employees supervise the program, which runs with the accompaniment of children's songs played on CDs. McGarry emphasized that there are always two people supervising.

The children stretch, to the tune of "Itsy Bitsy Spider," and then go through the "stations" on the bus like a course. The bus is both air-conditioned and heated and is always stationary when the children are using it, Denton said.

The program generally lasts about half an hour. When a location has more than 15 children, they go through the bus in shifts.

Fun Bus USA charges \$200 per hour for individual parties and charges day-care centers \$8.50 per child. The company can do about three parties per day on the weekends. During the week, the work is generally in the morning, so the two have been able to limit their hours to about 20 to 25 per week, which is what they prefer. They work 40 weeks of the year.



In the first 12 months of operation, July 2001 to July 2002, their revenue was \$50,000, they said, and they are on pace to take in about \$80,000 for the 12 months that ends July 2003. Liability insurance costs them \$1,600 a year, based on the estimated number of children who use the bus in a year, Denton said.

"Knock on wood, we have never had an accident," Denton said. The equipment is made of polyurethane foam and reinforced vinyl.

In recent months, because some of their advertising reaches areas they do not serve, they have been getting more requests for the bus that they have to turn down.

"We don't want to lose that business," Denton said.

However, they did not want to expand the business by hiring dozens of employees and buying a fleet of buses.

If they went that route, they would have the problems inherent in running a larger business, Denton said. For example, what do you do if you have several parties booked and several employees decide to call in sick?

Instead, the two decided to expand by franchising the business. Each franchise includes a region that would have about 200 day-care centers in it, Denton said. In New Jersey, that could be a county or parts of two counties, for example. The start-up cost for a franchisee, including the bus and equipment, ranges from \$48,000 to \$78,000, depending on the territory.

Fun Bus USA has just begun marketing the franchises and none have been sold yet.

The advantage of franchising is that they can expand the business and make more money without a huge investment in time, and they know each franchisee will be motivated, Denton said.

"If you own it, you're going to do it right," she said.