

Ain't we got Fun

Mother-daughter team offers up 'fitness fun on wheels'

by By FRANCES CARROLL
STAFF WRITER



The children walk out of the day care center in single file, across a small parking lot and board the lime green school bus parked on a quiet side street.

But this isn't any ordinary bus.

First of all there are no seats, and second of all, the children won't be going anywhere.

The only journey they will take today is one into the world of physical fitness - cleverly disguised as play and accompanied by an upbeat pop soundtrack.

The floor and sides of the bus, up to the windows, are covered with blue carpet. Strewn about are rainbow-colored tumbling mats, foam blocks, a small trampoline and a parallel bar. A pair of rings hangs from the roof.

For the next 25 minutes the children will get to literally climb the walls and swing from the ceiling, things usually discouraged in the classroom and at home.

The children at A Bright Beginning Child Care Center in North Brunswick just got their first visit from the Fun Bus, and the squeals of delight signal it has lived up to its name.

Having almost as much fun as the children on this visit to the center earlier this month are the mother-daughter team of Dawn McGarry and Kari Denton, owners of Fords-based Fun Bus Inc.

The pair started the company nearly two years ago after deciding work days of 12 hours or more at their Somerset day care center, Kids Come First, was getting to be too much.

Denton, a certified teacher, and McGarry, a former mortgage representative with bookkeeping experience, sold the center and began operating a two-bus fleet with the slogan ""Fitness Fun on Wheels."

In the beginning they traveled all over the state, wherever there was a paying customer. But in little more than a year their services for children ages 2 to 7 became so in demand at local day care centers, schools, summer camps, churches and birthday parties, that they limited the area they would drive to and began turning away customers.

"Chuck E. Cheese is getting old, it's Fun Bus now," said McGarry, of the company's thriving private birthday party business.

That is when they decided to expand their reach by selling franchises ... "when we were tired of saying no," said McGarry, 52, out of whose Fords home Fun Bus Inc. operates.

"Our lawyer said you either lose business, have someone copycat you, or you franchise," explained Denton, 28, of Tinton Falls.

In October, they got their franchise license under the name Fun Bus USA and this year they started marketing 23 territories in the state, which sell for a \$25,000 franchise fee and 7 percent of all future earnings.

McGarry and Denton said they earned about \$51,000 in their first 10 months of operation, and \$80,000 in the past 12 months. They gross about \$2,000 a week, serving 200 children a month.



They have two workers on the payroll who log about 13 hours a week, while they each work part-time, putting in about 25 hours.

There are over 4,000 day care centers in New Jersey and each franchise territory will have about 200, said Denton.

Some centers pay for the service at a rate of \$150 an hour, but more often it is offered as an elective to parents, who pay \$8.50 per child per session. Birthday parties are charged at a rate of \$200 an hour.

McGarry and Denton's own territory of northern Middlesex County, with their established client list, is also for sale. They said they are ready to give up working on the bus and concentrate instead on overseeing their franchises to ensure success. They eventually want to expand out of state.

The pair say they are in discussions with a handful of serious potential franchisees and have had inquiries from a dozen more, including some as far away as Pennsylvania and Massachusetts who learned about the company from its Web site, <http://www.funbuses.com/>. The idea of a fitness-oriented bus serving customers at their home or business is not original. There are other buses outfitted with exercise equipment that travel to different sites.

Denton and McGarry got the idea for Fun Bus from one they hired to come to their day care center. That bus was associated with a gym and focused on gymnastics, and while Denton and McGarry liked the idea, they didn't think it was much fun for young children.

On the gymnastics bus, children had to wait as each one took a turn on a particular apparatus, learning one move with the help of the lone instructor.

Denton and McGarry thought it would be more exciting for children if there was upbeat music, singing, and all the students got to participate in a variety of activities at the same time, so no one would get bored standing in line.

"We were probably putting 50 to 60 hours in at the day care center," said Denton. "We wanted a little more flexibility. We said there's got to be something else out there where we could work with kids and still make a living. We picked up on (the gymnastic bus) concept and made it more fun."

"We keep them going," said McGarry, adding a main component of every session is an obstacle course with about six activities that the children run through at their own pace.

They bought an old school bus with 72,000 miles on it for \$1,500 and had it gutted. Denton estimates it will cost franchisees about \$25,000 to purchase and outfit a bus.

There are always two adults with the children and the bus never moves with children on it.

"It's not just 'come on the bus and play'. It's very structured," said Denton of the sessions, which begin with warm-ups and end with a cool-down sing-a-long. "We're doing fitness, coordination, gross motor skills.

"Most (day care centers) look at it as a fitness program," said Denton. "They like the fact the kids have a chance to run and play and swing, other than in a classroom because that's so limiting."

With the franchises, McGarry and Denton said they are selling their experience and an operating system that works ... now.

It took a lot of trial and error to get to this point, they said.

The first summer they didn't have air conditioning on the bus and McGarry threatened to quit because it was so unbearably hot.



They soon installed a \$10,000 heating and air conditioning unit.

They bought a ball pit, but discovered it was time-consuming to clean and children either sat in it for the entire session or threw all the balls outside of the pit. They don't use the ball pit anymore, unless it is specifically requested by a customer.

"We spent a couple thousand dollars on mistakes, things that were just not practical but looked good in the catalog," said Denton.

Bright Beginning owner Sandra Sino said she paid for the Fun Bus to visit to see whether it would be another service she would like to offer parents, who would assume the cost. She said she thinks it will be, noting the center does not have a gymnasium.

"I thought it was creative," said Sino. "It's really good for the children to get out of the school and get some fresh air and exercise, and it's safe because it's right outside the door."