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BY Heather Pharo

Barnegat Family Rolls Out Fitness Fun on Wheels

With its colorful paint job — smiling cartoon kids on a pea green background — the Fun Bus is hard to ignore.

The inside of the refurbished school bus is just as cheery. Only the driver's seat remains; the rest of the surprisingly roomy interior is padded with gym mats and stocked with kid-friendly fitness equipment: a parallel bar, tumbling mat, balance beam and a big wavy slide at the bus's rear emergency exit.

The Fun Bus exists to give kids from 18 months to 7 years old an exciting, age-appropriate and family-run fitness experience.

Heather Leiter and her husband, Jason, who live in Barnegat, own the Ocean County franchise of the Fun Bus, taking the vehicle to birthday parties, schools, daycare centers and events such as last month's Harvest Festival in Stafford Township.

Together with her assistant, Heather leads the kids — not more than 15 at a time — through an extensive fitness routine.

"At the end they slide out the back," explained Heather. "They love it and they don't even realize they're getting exercise."

The routine begins with warm-up exercises and "waking up the bus."

"We make some noise, kick our feet and do all types of stretches."

After that, the kids complete a "circuit" around the bus, executing a forward roll down a tumbling wedge, climbing over a mat, shooting a basketball, twirling on the parallel bars with the help of the assistant, jumping on a trampoline, clambering over a doughnut-shaped mat, swinging on rings, scaling a rock wall, traversing a balance beam and thumping a punching bag.

The mats are then cleared out and Heather uses the big open area to

conduct fitness games using scarves, beanbags and parachutes. "We try to change it week to week." The activities are adapted to the age of the children onboard, she added.

The experience also includes sing-alongs, imaginative play and discus-

the Explorer.

Heather first stumbled upon the Fun Bus when she booked it for a party for Chloe.

"She loved it," Heather recalled. "She talked about it for months."

"I thought it was the coolest thing



Photographs by Ryan Morrill

ROMPER ROOM: (Top) Chloe Leiter, 4, and her sister Isabel, 2, have a ball inside the Fun Bus; (below) Business owners Jason and Heather Leiter show the girls how to slide.

sions on nutrition and leading a healthy lifestyle. It all wraps up with the "Goodbye, Fun Bus" song and an exciting slide out the back.

The Leiters have always been into fitness, often going skiing. Both of the Leiters' daughters, 4-year-old Chloe and 2-year-old Isabel, have been active in gymnastics; Chloe also plays soccer.

"We find (fitness) very important, especially since we've had kids," said Heather. The growing rates of childhood obesity and diabetes, she said, were a special incentive to keep the girls active — to "get them away from the TV, get them outside and get them moving."

It isn't just about physical fitness, though. A session in the Fun Bus is an exercise for the developing mind as well as the body.

"We try to focus on gross motor skills," said Heather. "We teach colors, shapes and numbers by pointing out different things on the bus."

The use of positive reinforcement helps to build children's self-esteem, she added.

The bus is completely climate-controlled. The system operates on a generator, so the vehicle can be shut off during the exercise session — which means kids can still play and run around even when it might be too hot, cold or rainy to do so outside.

It's also equipped with a high-tech stereo system, so they can exercise to the sounds of music from the likes of the Wiggles and Dora

I'd ever seen," said Jason.

So the Leiters decided to research the company and discovered the franchise opportunity. They first rolled out their own bus just last month, traveling to Linden to pick it up.

"I knew it was a good thing when we were driving down the Parkway and kids were screaming and waving at us," he recalled.

The Fun Bus company, based out of Tinton Falls, is still relatively small and young, having been founded in 2001. Twenty-four buses operate in New York, Virginia, North Carolina, Florida, Illinois and Colorado as well as New Jersey. The Leiters' bus is the southernmost franchise in the state.

"It's a mom and pop operation," said Heather. "But they want to go national."

The Fun Bus seemed a perfect fit, business-wise, to the Leiters.

Having left an eight-year corporate career at Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield to become a stay-at-home mom and part-time Realtor, Heather was looking for an opportunity that would fit in with her family-oriented lifestyle.

She does most of the hands-on work with the bus, while Jay, who works for PSE&G, is a partner on the business side of things.

"I know what's important to moms and dads," she remarked. "We give a really structured party where we get the kids on the bus and have them running and jumping and tumbling."

Of course, for parents the safety of their children is of utmost importance. Heather is certified in gymnastics, CPR and first aid, and the business is fully insured. All mats are professional-grade and even the walls are padded.

"We take safety very seriously," she said.

And she doesn't guard just against serious injuries. After each party or event, the Fun Bus is thor-

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oroughly sanitized to prevent kids from picking up germs.

Heather is confident the investment will repay itself.

"I think over the next several years we should turn a profit," she said, adding the franchise has a "fairly low" startup cost, especially for "just a regular husband and wife who've never owned a business before."

"The birthday party sells themselves," she explained. "Our goal is to get into schools" for regularly scheduled visits.

In the meantime, Chloe and Isabel are getting plenty of use out of the bus when it's not parked at a party or festival. On rainy days, the family will often head to the Manahawkin storage facility where the bus is parked and have a little fun.

"We'll drive it up our street and try to get a couple of the neighbor kids out sometimes," Jason added.

To book a Fun Bus event, Heather Leiter can be contacted at 607-0400 or oceancounty@funbuses.com. For more information on the company, go to www.funbuses.com.

— Heather Pharo