

Times Community, VA

The Green Machine

February 20, 2007

BY Jennifer Fulcher

Times-Mirror Staff



Children's bubbling laughter and beaming smiles fill the room whenever the bright green Fun Bus comes to town.

The Fun Bus - a school bus retrofitted with play mats, a climbing wall, basketball hoop and swing - provides a new option to keep children active during the day.

"They can't participate in a gym," said Rondie Simpson, who co-owns a local Fun Bus franchise with his wife, Liane. "This is a place where they can participate."

The Simpsons, residents of Ashburn, began rolling their bus out to local neighborhoods last October.

A mother-daughter team in New Jersey founded Fun Bus USA Inc. because they wanted to provide fitness opportunities for children. Their vision was for "fitness fun on wheels." The pair decided that a traveling gym could go to the customer by way of parties, special events, day-care centers and schools.

Simpsons' Fun Bus can be seen parked outside day-care centers in Loudoun during the week and at birthday parties throughout the area on weekends. The green bus is hard to miss - the outside is decorated with colorful bubble letters and cartoon images of children playing. The interior is painted a lighter shade of green and lined with yellow, blue, green and red mats.

"Children definitely love it," said Marcie Peterson, director of the Kiddie Academy of Lansdowne, a day-care center.

Simpson has made it his mission to keep children active and happy during their time on the bus. His enthusiasm on the job combined with upbeat family songs make it hard not to have a good time.

"Our customers are children," he said. "We have a lot of fun. There's a lot of laughter."

Two instructors lead the children through organized activities that change each visit. Children can play a hot potato game and dance to the "I Can Dance" song one week, and play on a disk swing and climb the rock wall the next. The only rule is that the children use their "listening ears," Simpson said. As long as the children listen to the instructors, they will have a safe time.

The children are so busy having fun that they don't realize they are exercising. They play games that teach teamwork, and they learn how to do flips and climb.

"They're really developing those skills," Simpson said. "They're amazing." Simpson said he enjoys his job because he sees the children developing skills over time. Simpson and his wife attended a weeklong training session to learn about the activities they offer and how to work with the children safely.

It's even exciting to get off the bus, Simpson said, when he attaches a slide to the emergency exit at the back. "Once the session is over [the children] get to slide out the back."

At this time of year, it can be hard for children to get the exercise they need because opportunities to play outside are few. Too often children are cooped up indoors, out of the wind, ice and snow.

"With the weather being bad," day-care director Peterson said, "the children need a place for their gross motor development."

Fortunately, Simpson said, "inclement weather is our friend. We are climate controlled." The bus provides an indoor heated activity center designed specifically for children.

The bus never moves when children are on it, Simpson emphasized. He parks the bus and takes the keys out of the ignition. A generator provides the heat and air conditioning.

The Fun Bus visits day-care centers in Loudoun usually between 9:30 a.m. and noon. Depending on the center, children are grouped by age and taken on the bus for 30-minute sessions. A maximum of 15 children are allowed on the bus at a time. The Fun Bus is limited to participants ages 2 to 7 because of height restrictions.

Day-care centers usually book the bus for one day a week for 10 weeks. Parents can choose to have their children participate in any or all of the Fun Bus sessions for \$10 a session.

The Fun Bus also hosts birthday parties for up to 15 children. Included in the \$275 birthday package are T-shirts, 15 Fun Bus invitations, stickers and tattoos. Children get one hour of play time during parties. The bus arrives at the birthday child's house ready for fun.

"Just give us a parking space and we're ready to go," Simpson said. "We do all kinds of special events." He said the business can run wherever there is space for the bus to park legally. The bus has entertained children at the Fall for Fairfax festival and a breast cancer walk. Simpson compares the business to a moon bounce, just with a different appeal.

For any activity parents must sign a waiver form and provide basic information about their child's health. Simpson emphasized that the bus is cleaned thoroughly after each stop or group of children on the bus. Parents are invited to inspect the bus or talk to the owners about any cautions or concerns.

Simpson hopes to expand the business to a total of six buses - two in Loudoun, two in Washington, D.C. and two in Maryland. He added that the business is always looking for more gigs and more good help.

A father of two young children, Simpson started this program because he recognized the importance of children leading an active lifestyle in a safe environment. He said he hopes the value of healthy, fun exercise for children catches on in the area. The Fun Bus is here to fill this niche.

"I have lost my name - I'm now 'Mr. Fun Bus'," he said. To book an activity with Loudoun's Mr. Fun Bus, visit www.funbuses.com or call 703-717-5405.

Contact the reporter at jfulcher@timespapers.com

