

Reading to Go Places in Bartow County

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By Krystin Dean

"What could inspire a generation of children to look beyond where they are to a different future?" That's what "Reading to Go Places" Bookmobile Executive Director Valerie Gilreath asked herself in 2016 regarding the youth in southern Bartow County.

Gilreath's mother grew up there, so she was aware of the challenges—but a Community Health Needs Assessment emphasized the extent of the gap in resources and the need to augment efforts of the schools and government. Every survey, conversation, and focus group led Gilreath to a mobile solution.

"We needed to take services out into the neighborhoods, meeting people where they are," said Gilreath. "I wanted to create a source of pride for the community, something useful but also fun. What could start planting the seeds of change within families and bring people together? A bookmobile."

The "Allatoona community" is home to the county's most concentrated pockets of poverty—nearly double that of the rest of Bartow. Mobile homes comprise 48 percent of total housing units, which is four times higher than the county average. The highly transient population has a higher churn rate of students transferring within a school year than any of the county's other 11 elementary schools.

"All of this adds up to generational poverty," said Gilreath. "Multiple generations have dropped out of high school. If they work, they make minimum wage because they don't have any education. There's a high rate of children not being raised by birth parents, a high incidence of drug abuse among parents and caregivers, and a higher crime rate than the rest of the county."

Many residents also don't have a library within 10 miles of home, making it difficult for low-income families, especially those without reliable transportation, to access books.



"It's a big idea wrapped in a deceptively simple package," Gilreath said. "How do you break a cycle of generational poverty? Education. What's the biggest indicator of educational success? Reading proficiency. What's the key to reading proficiency? Access to books and reading within families. How do you get a child to dream beyond their current circumstances? Reading."

The motto "Reading to Go Places" was cemented. Gilreath and Kim Dennis, the bookmobile's education coordinator, self-funded expenses to get the wheels turning. In 2017, the Community Foundation of Northwest Georgia and United Way of Bartow County financed the vehicle purchase, exterior wrap, and shelving supplies. Both have awarded additional funds in later grant cycles.

Gilreath's parents offered their time and talents to build the interior bookshelves. A donor delivered a large collection of books for adults, and the Friends of the Bartow County Library regularly donate books for teens and children from its used book inventory. Support from Bartow County Government and local businesses have also been pivotal to the program's success.

"The bookmobile has no paid staff, so our two-person team relies on dedicated volunteers to provide services and keep things running smoothly," said Gilreath. She handles administrative duties including fundraising, while Dennis handles day-to-day operations.



The bookmobile visits two areas in the “Allatoona community” once a month, along with weekly visits to four low-income neighborhoods during the summertime. Each stop includes story time programming, and each child receives a free book. “Reading to Go Places” has also become a staple at public events where book giveaways are often centered on themes like poetry and holidays.

Nearly 400 bookmobile library card lanyards have been issued, 4,593 books have been given away, and 1,762 books have been checked out since 2017. Each child can check out up to three books. There are no fines or fees, and around half of the books make it back.

“We’re prepared to keep replenishing inventory,” said Gilreath. “Even if a child never brings a book back, we continue to let them check out more. One young girl has 17 books ‘checked out’ right now. Hopefully that’s 17 books that remain in her home.”

The bookmobile’s target region has expanded to include central Bartow County this year, and partnerships have been established with four child care and pre-K centers. Grant funding from Literacy for All, via a partnership with Bartow Collaborative, enables the bookmobile to be staffed during afterschool hours, and plans are in place to begin weekly afterschool visits to two elementary schools this fall. Three free “little libraries” have been established in the area, with two more coming soon.



A new partnership with Bartow Family Resources, a local organization that helps women and families in crisis, allows “Reading to Go Places” to host classes on early language and literacy development. Families receive free books along with “baby bucks” to acquire diapers, clothes, and other essentials.

“We’ve become a literacy ambassador of sorts across Bartow. The bookmobile is a good visual touchstone to get kids excited about reading,” said Gilreath. “For parents and caregivers, we share strategies to create language-rich home environments and model talking and reading aloud to children. Literacy changes lives. It’s one of the surest ways to interrupt a cycle of generational poverty.”

To learn more about the “Reading to Go Places” Bookmobile, visit readingtogoplaces.org (<http://readingtogoplaces.org/>), contact readingtogoplaces@gmail.com (<mailto:readingtogoplaces@gmail.com>), or follow them on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/bartowbookmobile/>).

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