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Reading to go places: Bookmobile helps

Featured

south Bartow families thrive

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In a nod to her youth, Tracey Snowden is delighted to foster her children's learning pursuits through the Bookmobile — Reading to go places! On Oct. 21, the Acworth resident accompanied her 9-year-old daughter, Hannah, and 14-year-old son, Jeremias, to check out the literacy program's materials at the Allatoona Resource Center.

"My impression of the ... Bookmobile was great," Snowden said. "We were able to borrow books. Because the library is too far and the children love to read, [I am] very pleased to have the resources close to home — good books that the children will continue to enjoy."

"It was easy for the children to find books they liked and [are] able to read at their level. My favorite was when Hannah asked me when the Bookmobile's coming again, so she could share her books with her third-grade classmates at Allatoona Elementary [School's] Mrs. Stone's class. I am from Providence, Rhode Island. I grew up with the bookmobile. So, I was able to read more

experience something that I was able to experience as a child.

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Referring to reading as a magical experience, Valerie Gilreath is furthering literacy through her Bookmobile — Reading to go places! As its founder and executive director, the Acworth resident launched the mobile resource in July, focusing on the south Bartow community.

“I worked on a project with public health last summer that involved talking to several hundred south Bartow residents, as well as teachers at Allatoona and Emerson elementary schools,” said Gilreath, who also serves as the director for the Bartow County Grant Writing department. “With every conversation, it became clearer that something was needed — something that could augment the efforts of the schools and the government. We needed to be able to take services out into the neighborhoods, to meet people where they are. I wanted to create a source of pride for the community, something that is useful but also fun, something that could bring people together to get to know one another.

“What could be mobile, start planting the seeds of change within families and grow a sense of community? What could inspire a generation of children to look beyond where they are to a different future? What could do all that? My answer to those questions was a bookmobile. I like to think of it as big ideas wrapped in a deceptively simple package. How do you break a cycle of generational poverty? Education. What is the biggest indicator of educational success? Reading proficiency. How do you get a child to dream beyond their current circumstances? Reading. Hence our motto: Reading to go places.”

Along with 219 books being checked out from the Bookmobile, the program has issued 66 library cards and given away about 400 books since its inception.

“The main objective [of the Bookmobile] is to get books into the hands of children and adults and to encourage families to read together,” Gilreath said. “The Bookmobile acts as a lending library. We issue each participant a Bookmobile Library Card; each person can check out three books per visit. We ask that they bring the books back the next month. We don’t charge any



The advertisement features a red rounded rectangle logo for "CENTURY BANK OF GEORGIA". Below the logo, the slogan "Your Money... WHEREVER You" is displayed in large white letters. Underneath that, the text "Century Bank Mobile Ba" is partially visible. At the bottom, a red button contains the text "Just Click Here TO GET ST".

replenish inventory periodically in case they aren't. In addition to the lending library function, the Bookmobile gives away books regularly to encourage families to build their own home libraries.

"... The overall purpose of the Bookmobile — Reading to go places! is to help the families of south Bartow thrive. In the short term, that may look as simple as a family enjoying books together. According to the Children's Literacy Foundation, 61 percent of low-income families have no age-appropriate books in their home. Having books in the home and being read to from birth is critical to a child's early language development and a significant factor in school readiness and success. The Bookmobile program ensures that south Bartow families have access to age-appropriate books, and we strive to educate families about the importance of creating a language-rich environment in the home. This strong literacy foundation will result in more children staying in school, graduating, then going on to technical school, vocational school or college."

Currently, the Bookmobile is open to the public the third Saturday of the month from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Allatoona Resource Center, 6503 Glade Road in Acworth. Along with new customers, the effort also is seeing traffic from repeat reading enthusiasts.

"When we opened our doors [in the] summer of 2015, our mission was set to provide the residents of south Bartow access to education, resources, information and services," ARC Site Coordinator Nichole Varnell said. "We at the ARC, understood how important it was for us to forge relationships with community partners in carrying out our mission. Therefore, when the Bookmobile presented the opportunity to form a partnership, we were all in favor, not only because their mission aligned well with ours, but it was such a fabulous idea and the only one of its kind within the county."

"For many of the residents living in the unincorporated areas of the county, a lack of transportation is a huge barrier, limiting access to many places, including the public library. I would like to note that the closest Bartow County library is about 15 miles north of here and many just do not have the transportation to get there. The Bookmobile helps fill that gap in making this



The Allatoona Community Trunk or Treat Oct. 27 was another way its

supporters continue to “build relationships and foster a sense of community.”

In the near future, Gilreath plans to extend the Bookmobile’s reach. Along with setting up at Emerson City Hall one Saturday a month starting in December, the mobile resource also will partner with the Summer Feeding Program and provide a summer reading program at several south Bartow sites.

Looking long term, Gilreath envisions adding a mobile technology lab with access to computers, creating stationary lending libraries in the southern portion of Bartow and expanding the Bookmobile program throughout the county.

“So far, we’ve enjoyed a warm reception in the community, and the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive,” Gilreath said. “The Bookmobile inspires nostalgia in many adults. I don’t remember ever seeing a bookmobile when I was growing up, but numerous adults from Bartow County and other parts of the U.S. have approached us and shared stories of how a bookmobile enriched their lives growing up. Many say it was the highlight of their week when the bookmobile came down their street. I hope that our program can create similar fond memories in the children that we serve.

“We have several families who come visit every time we are at the Allatoona Resource Center. One of these families includes an 8-year-old girl who told us the first time we met her, ‘I don’t read. I like video games.’ She stood by while her younger brother eagerly picked out a book. Still, we talked with her and encouraged her to pick out a book and give it a try. She reluctantly accepted one of the “Dork [Diaries]” titles and took it with her. A month later, she came running up to the Bookmobile with the book gushing about how good it was. She was excited to check out more books, and she brought two of her young cousins over and insisted they get library cards. It made my heart melt a little.”

Focusing on the south Bartow community, Gilreath stressed the importance of addressing the residents’ needs, some of which include low housing

“It is important to promote literacy in this county because children who can’t read proficiently by the end of the third grade are four times more likely to drop out of school,” Gilreath said. “In Bartow County, only 33.5 percent of our students are achieving this milestone. The third-to-fourth grade transition is crucial because up until the end of the third grade, children are learning to read. After that, they are reading to learn. The inability to read well at the end of the third grade will impact a child’s ability to learn other subjects, such as math and science. A teen who drops out of high school will become an adult who struggles to find employment and achieve financial stability. Illiteracy or low-literacy is linked to higher rates of unemployment, homelessness, crime and incarceration. Right now, 26 percent of adults age 18 to 24 in Bartow do not have a high school diploma or G.E.D.

“These aren’t abstract statistics to me. My mother grew up on Glade Road. I grew up visiting aunts, uncles and cousins in the Allatoona area. Some in my family did not get the benefit of early reading and language development. I have watched many of those family members and subsequent generations drop out of high school, battle drug addiction, incarceration, teen pregnancy and poverty. I’m convinced that reading made the difference for me. Reading showed me that another world existed and gave me hope that I could live in that world.”

A separate entity from Bartow County government or the Bartow County Library System, the Bookmobile continues to rely on the public’s support — and the Friends of the Bartow County Library System — to stock its shelves. In addition to donations, the literacy program is funded by sponsorships and grants from organizations, such as the Community Foundation of Northwest Georgia and the United Way of Bartow County.

“The community has been incredibly supportive, and I want to thank everyone who has contributed in some way,” Gilreath said. “I ask that people continue to invest in this work by participating in our fundraisers and book drives throughout the year. We are always in need of [children’s] books if anyone is interested in donating. Our first big fundraiser is April 28, 2018, in conjunction with the Bartow Literacy Council. It will be a farm-to-table dinner

"In addition to donations, we need volunteers. Volunteers are vital to the work we do. We know there are others in the community who are passionate about reading and literacy. We invite you to come share that passion through the Bookmobile."

For more information about the Bookmobile, visit its Facebook page,
www.facebook.com/pg/bartowbookmobile/posts.

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