

## **Bookin' It: Disability doesn't stop owner of mobile bookstore from roaming the Carolinas**

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CHARLOTTE, NC -- David Bratcher is bringing the books to the people.

Inspired by the nostalgia of bookmobiles of the past, and a love for community, Bratcher started Bookin' It, a mobile bookstore in late 2007. In an air-conditioned, 24-foot trailer fitted with shelves and carpeting, Bratcher's full-service bookstore roams the Carolinas attending festivals, parties and events.

When it's not on the road, the store has a semi-permanent space in downtown Belmont, where Bratcher can be seen under the canopy outside, making balloon animals, chatting with passersby or perhaps wearing a costume to celebrate a little-known holiday or landmark event.

Bratcher's unique business wasn't easy to get rolling. Not only did he face the usual obstacles to self-employment — funding, marketing, connecting to suppliers — but he also had to contend with more than a few naysayers, because Bratcher, business owner and entrepreneur, is developmentally disabled.

"He did those other jobs in the past — wrapping silverware, taking out trash, things like that," said Simone Bratcher, David's mother and the store manager. "He hit a point where he was no longer growing. He wanted something more satisfying."

Simone said they put together a list of David's strengths, which included his love of people, entertaining and books, and he came up with Bookin' It.

"I feel happy [working here]," David said. "I like people." The small, but roomy trailer affords him the opportunity to connect with each customer that comes in and share a favorite book, a balloon animal or just a friendly handshake.

"I think one thing he really likes is that he has more freedoms to decide how his day is going to be," said David's father Dave, who is the man behind the wheel (literally) of Bookin' It. "His ability to modify his day as it develops is a big plus for David."

By the time he started Bookin' It, David, 22, was already a veteran of the working world, having held jobs at Carowinds, where he discovered his love for costumes, The Gap and elsewhere. But crossing the line that separates employee from employer was more difficult than the Bratchers anticipated.

"The people we purchased the trailer from thought we were insane, but it was the agencies we were able to receive assistance from that were the most difficult to work with," Simone said.

It's not that the agencies they worked with were not willing to help, Bratcher said, they were just cautious.

### **'David is a Rarity'**

Statewide, numerous agencies and nonprofit organizations serve people with a wide range of disabilities. Many specialize in helping individuals find employment, including the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services' Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) and The Arc of North Carolina.

"We cover just about every conceivable disability," said Ed Bristol, marketing director at the DVR's Raleigh chapter. "If they can show their disability poses an impediment to employment, the DVR will provide assistance."

The agency offers a variety of support, from purchasing prosthetic limbs to funding education, all to get disabled

residents employed. Bristol said he has seen a rise in self-employment interest, but funding new businesses is a bit different than connecting employees with employers.

"The person in question must demonstrate the ability to direct and operate a business first," Bristol said.

Sara Osborne, executive director of the The Arc in Gastonia, a nonprofit organization with 40 chapters statewide, said they've helped connect many locals to employers.

"We have several people in the area that have become employed and actually have jobs here in the community," Osborne said. "David is the only one we've seen who has started a business, though."

Michele Stewart is the owner of Special Kare for Special Kids preschool, which employs several young adults with disabilities. She said many people told her that hiring the disabled to work in childcare would never work, but she's been at it for nearly 15 years.

"They are very dedicated, they take pride in their work, and they love having a job," Stewart said of her employees. "They don't get concerned about pay or raises; it's about the sheer joy of being in a job position and helping others."

Stewart said she works on a philosophy of inclusion and is just doing what she can to make a difference. Though she's seen many developmentally disabled workers and students come through Special Kare for Special Kids, few have done what David has. She recalled a young man with a disability she met years ago, who wanted to open his own mechanic shop. He worked hard getting trained and learning how to change oil and tires, but in the end he couldn't find any support to do it on his own, she said.

"David is a rarity," Stewart said. "There are many out there that would love to do something like him, but if you don't have a great family dynamic like he does, there is no support for it."

### **'They're Go-Getters'**

The Bratchers eventually found the funding they needed, in part as a result of their tenacity and strong family bond, Osborne said.

"We're huge fans of the Bratchers," said Osborne, whose son, Danny, is also developmentally disabled. "They are a testament to The Arc's vision and mission. They're go-getters. It's been awesome to see David in action."

"I'm just so proud of him that he will go out there and continue to struggle and to strive, and be a beacon to people with disabilities," Simone said.

Once they were able to prove that Bookin' It could work, the agencies they worked with swallowed their apprehension and sent support, she said.

"We helped them to become believers and they finally got on board. The agencies have been so great," Simone said. "They've provided a substantial amount of funding. At some point in his life, David will be independent enough that he won't have to return to the well."

The help offered by Dreamweavers Unlimited, a Gastonia organization that helps developmentally disabled people meet their goals, also has helped David achieve independence and step comfortably into the role of business owner, Simone said.

"[Consumer support specialists] act as coaches," said Human Resources Director Stephanie Brown. "They try to let him be independent, just giving him prompts when he needs them."

The two part-time coaches who work at Bookin' It, ultimately funded by Medicaid, help David run the register, complete order forms, make bank deposits and even communicate his intentions to customers. But it is clear that Bookin' It is David's business and they are there to assist him, Simone said.

“The idea for this program is to help people lead independent lives and not have to live in an institution,” she said. “It makes more sense morally and economically to assist [people like David] toward independence.”

According to Simone, David is on his way. Bookin’ It is a full retail business, offering the same books larger retailers do, with the added convenience of mobility. The profits are helping David reach a new level of independence. He recently took a trip to visit his sister in Florida and was able to pay for it himself, Simone said.

“I think the most important thing this whole experience has taught us as a family is that with hard work and faith, there’s not too much you can’t do,” Simone said. “Nobody is getting rich here, but the way I see it, if you work hard, feel good about it, and you learned something, it is worth it.”