

Books on the Bus keep kids engaged during commute

By Kelsey O'Connor
The Ithaca Voice

When most people step on the bus, swipe their pass and sit down, they rine out until they reach their stop. But one bus in Ithaca is transforming that daily transit into an engaging time for kids by supplying fun and educational books.

The idea started with longtime TCAT driver Randall Turner.

When children read while in transit, Turner said, the entire dynamic of the bus changes.

"When the books come out for the children, it's not just I'm going from Point A to Point B time, it's suddenly, it's family time. Right then and there," Turner said. "And then that instantly evolves into community time because anyone else on the bus — if they choose to read the books out loud and the child reads out loud or the parent reads out loud — people stop what they're doing and look and observe this book reading."

Turner keeps at least a dozen books on his bus and chooses each one with care. He looks for books full of art to keep kids' attention and so it can be seen by other passengers. The books he chooses are not only entertaining but educational. He has stocked books that engage children in science, technology, engineering and math. There are also more creative books, too.

At right, panda and owl board books are tucked into a pocket on a Route 10 TCAT bus.

The books, and sometimes little plush toys that go along with them, have made bus commutes something to look forward to for kids and parents.

Local resident Kathleen Weldon said her two sons, Max, 7, and Nate, 5, have really connected with books they received on the bus. Weldon said she told Turner about Max's love for stories (and his flair for the dramatic), and the next time she was on the bus, he gave her a book on creative writing. She said Max read it a few times and was interested, but she didn't realize just how much he had absorbed.

Weldon said a few days later she was out shopping when she described something as "static."

"Nate asked what the word meant. I said it was something that stayed the same, that didn't change. And Max piped up, 'the opposite is dynamic, that's something that changes,'" she said. "I was surprised and asked where he had learned that. 'My writing book,' he said.

"Just think what the right book at the right time could mean to a child," Weldon added. "Randall has always been a special person; everyone who rides his bus knows him and is happy to see him. But this idea he's had, and the thorough, careful way he's researched and planned it to be

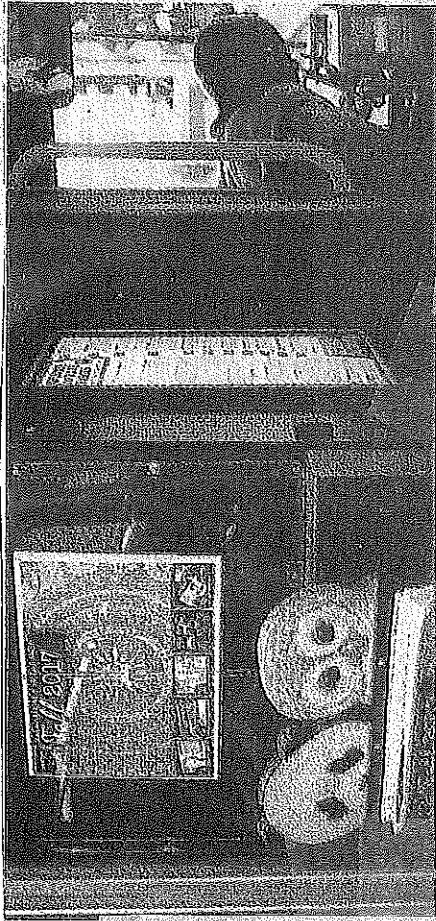


Photo by Kelsey O'Connor/The Ithaca Voice

as meaningful as possible, is simply extraordinary. TCAT — and Ithaca — is so lucky to have him."

Another parent's perspective of the Ithaca community has been shaped in part by the books on the bus. Judy Wang rides the bus every day with her 5-year-old daughter, Summer. Wang and her family are spending a year in Ithaca from China for a program at the vet school at Cornell University. They do not have a car, so they rely on the bus.

Wang said her daughter loves the books and they read together on the bus or sometimes take them home to read. A book for kids about coding, "My First Coding Book," brought out her daughter's logic side, Wang said. As a foreigner, Wang said she loves the program and having books on the bus and Turner as a resource to recommend books has been a great resource.

"(The) library is the place to read books, but you have to go there and stay there for awhile sometimes," Wang said. "While you go shopping or something, on the bus you have nothing to do, the kids (have) nothing to do too, either."

"If there are books for them, then they can be quiet and at the same time, they learn something," she added. "It's a good way not to waste time."

Turner was actually inspired to start the books initiative, called Reading on TCAT, in June after

gathering educational materials for Summer. The idea evolved as he would see parents worn out with their kids and asked if having books on the bus would help keep them occupied. He remembers once a father scolding a child for playing with the handrail and thought if he had a book for his age group, he would not have been bored and then scolded.

He has continued to add books to his collection since then by browsing local bookstores, researching online and asking for feedback from passengers who are experts in certain areas, like architecture or ornithology.

"I like the fact that because it's grassroots, we're getting books that are what our customers are saying they like," Turner said.

When he says he's happy when his customers are happy, he really seems to mean it. He has lived in Tompkins County for most of his life. He said he loves the Ithaca community.

"It's nice that Ithaca is small enough of a city that you can get to

know people and it actually matters," Turner said.

Turner's passion for books is infectious as he talks about how he selects each one. One book he said he is excited to share with passengers is "Look Out for Bugs" by Jen Prokopowicz. The beautiful panoramic art caught his attention and makes the book "too great to forget," he said. It is a seek-and-find children's book with scenes hand made with paper and photographed.

Currently he's debating between the books "What Do You Do With an Idea?" and "What Do You Do With a Problem?" by Kobi Yamada and would love feedback from the community.

The program is in the testing phase. In the future, Turner said he would love to see the program expand to more buses, but said that's up to TCAI.

"I'm just a dreamer and the researcher right now, but the final decision is based on the feedback from our passengers," Turner said.