

Book Bike Program

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In 2014 Middlebury hit the 50% free and reduced lunch eligibility benchmark needed to qualify for free summer meals. The library started serving lunches twice a week after storytimes, but very few people chose to stay for lunch. We signed up to be a free lunch site because we wanted all children to have access to healthy foods, but we were not the right location for that to happen.

Middlebury's Parks and Recreation Department also became a free lunch site in 2014. Parks and Rec drew a large crowd each day but found that families and kids tended to eat and run. There appeared to be a stigma attached to the lunches, despite efforts to attract a wide range of socioeconomic groups, and people had no desire to linger and be "caught" eating a free lunch. The program felt less like a part of the community and more like a shameful secret.



I suggested to Parks and Rec that the library provide a storytime during the lunch program twice a week. I purchased a bike from our local bike swap event (\$60), loaded up the library's brand new bike trailer (\$75) with books, threw on a superhero costume, and pedaled from the library over to Parks and Rec. The Book Bike program was born.



The actual program looks something like this: I roll up on my bike just as lunch service is starting. I set up a display of free books the children can take home, conduct readers advisory, and entertain children as everyone makes their way through the food line. Once everyone has their food, I move to the picnic area and start storytime. I read 4-5 books based on a theme linked to a costume I'm wearing. We rarely sing or dance (hard to do while eating), so I make sure to select books that allow me to pull out my acting skills: silly voices, big body language, audience asides.



Books for the program were either donated from home bookshelves, items that had been withdrawn from our collection, or purchased with a grant from a local non-profit. Kids could select one book to take with them each visit. Children do not need a library card. If they love the book they pick, they are encouraged to keep it. If not, they can bring it back to the library for someone else to read. About 90% of books from the book bike stayed out in the community. The library Friend's group funds the supplies to make costumes for my storytimes. The costumes aren't professional quality but the anticipation of "What is Ms. Tricia going to be wearing THIS time?" drew a lot of kids back week after week and is one of our most successful marketing campaigns.



2019 was my fifth year biking from the library to Parks and Rec to offer a once a week storytime to families at the free lunch program. People stay longer on storytime days to visit and to listen to stories. This summer Book Bike Storytime had the highest attendance of any of my recurring programs, in-house or outreach, and was populated by an older-elementary crowd that I rarely get in my in-house library programs. The crowd is a roughly 50/50 split between regular library users who come for the storytime but stay for the lunch, and non-library users who come for the lunch stay for the storytime and free books. The program is a win-win, allowing the library to serve a population we do not otherwise connect with and support a community building in Middlebury.

See the Book Bike in action here: <https://youtu.be/plU19WiCWys>

