

The Jolly Trolley Powers On

BY NATALIE LERNER | PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE HOLDERNESS FAMILY

We are coming up on five years since Hurricane Harvey and two years since a pandemic was declared. We are a strong community of hard workers and creative thinkers however. Our resilience and determination turns devastation into massive beauty. The Jolly Trolley is a great example of such spirit. She has worked hard to power on, spreading joy wherever she goes.

Spark of an Idea

It was early 2017, and Ben was three-years-old. His daycare had some enrichment programs available. Of those options was a gymnastics bus that would visit on Tuesday mornings. Ben looked forward to it each week so much that on Tuesday mornings he was up and ready for school without a complaint.

"Seeing his excitement about the bus made us want to see what it was all about," his mom, Chelsey Holderness, explained.

"One day I decided to visit the bus during his class time. The bus was all white, with no branding. It looked like an adult gym. Everything was dull—a black trampoline, faded cushions... it had seen better days; everything was well loved. Yet the kids were just going wild having a ball on this bus."

Immediately, Chelsey had the idea that this could really be turned into something special. She envisioned Disney World on wheels and started thinking about what kind of vehicle would bring the most joy to kids and what they would love to see pulling up. That's where the idea of a trolley instead of a bus came from.

"Kids just love trolleys," declared Chelsey. "I talked to my husband, Jack, about the idea. He loved it and immediately envisioned it called, 'The Jolly Trolley'."

Action Starts

Chelsey and Jack created a business plan together, worked out the numbers, and decided to put their savings into it. They were also very fortunate to get funding from a family member who wanted to invest after seeing our business plan and drive.

Two months after having the idea, they had their first trolley on the way to Houston from Florida.



"We focused a lot on branding because we wanted to create a character, like Thomas the train, that kids could relate to," shared Chelsey. "We named the trolley Holly, and gave her an upbeat personality and a big smile. I was fortunate to have my sister Rachael, who worked at a creative agency at the time, help us with branding."

Challenges

Chelsey and Jack worked tirelessly to get things ready for a fall launch when Hurricane Harvey hit.

"Being just downstream from both reservoirs, our plans, our world, got turned upside down," Chelsey recalled. "We had to be rescued by boat. I remember carrying Ben in one arm and my cat, Bernice, in the other, while Jack was getting us on the boat, and I was pregnant while going through all of this. Our whole neighborhood had five feet of water sitting in our homes for over a week, and most people did not move back until over a year later. We were driven to be back in our house before Violet arrived. Thanks to all of the help we had from our amazing family and friends, we were, six months later."

They were dealing with rebuilding their home and building the business all at the same time. Three months after Violet was born, Chelsey hit the road marketing the Jolly Trolley to daycares (and discovering the importance of comfortable shoes as she remembers her feet being so sore from being on them constantly). But they powered through all of these challenges and were able to launch by fall 2018, at full capacity.

"Our first year of business was great," Chelsey said with a smile. "Daycare



Photo by David Postma

directors, parents and kids all loved the trolley, and she was developing quite a fan base. We were excited and relieved to see that the idea was as successful as we thought; it was really working. Then came 2020. The pandemic shut down the world, and we had to shut down along with it, alongside the threat of murder hornets."

Success

They did not let a flood keep them down, and certainly weren't going to let a pandemic do so either.

Chelsey expanded, "We knew our idea was good and that children just loved Holly, so we got back on the road in September of 2021. We had to start from scratch to build up our route with daycares, but this time with concern of Covid. We did a lot to make sure parents and daycares felt safe letting their children play in a public space."

All of their exhaustive efforts paid off. They have had an amazing seven months since back on the road. They were invited to be in the Thanksgiving Day Parade, published their first children's book with the help of Chelsey's two sisters, Erica and Rachael, and also now have two trolleys at full capacity with an amazing staff that loves the children they work with every day.

