

Palm Tran purple bus rolls out in honor of Purple Heart recipients

Brittany Shammass, Sun Sentinel
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A new tribute to veterans is rolling through Palm Beach County.

Dedicated to local Purple Heart recipients, Palm Tran's "Purple Bus" features the faces of 24 Palm Beach County residents awarded the Purple Heart, a military honor given to those injured or killed in service. The bus hit the streets last week, running on a route from Boca Raton to Palm Beach Gardens.



"You'll have to see it," said Don Mates, an 89-year-old World War II veteran, Purple Heart recipient and Palm Beach resident who is pictured on the bus. "It's just marvelous. It's a work of art, it really is."

Part salute, part public service announcement on wheels, the bus is meant to raise awareness of the county's veterans and to inform veterans about the services available to them. Palm Beach County is home to the most veterans in the state.

There are nearly 100,000 here, spanning from World War II to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. And 222 of them have been awarded the Purple Heart.

But many don't realize the scope of what they're entitled to, said Greg Dover, veteran service officer supervisor for the county's Division of Human & Veteran Services.

The bus is one way of addressing that. It lists the phone number and other information about the county's services for vets.

Calls have spiked in the few days it's been on the road, Dover said.

"There were a couple of calls where people were saying, 'I didn't know you existed. I need help with this,'" he said. "We were able to already help people with referrals from the bus itself, so I think it's going to do great things for veterans in the county."

In choosing veterans to appear on the bus, officials tried to represent each branch of the military and World War II, Vietnam, Korea, Desert Storm, Afghanistan and Iraq. They chose to list the branch and conflict each served in and leave their names off it, wanting the men to instead be representative.

Out of humility, many of the veterans approached about the bus declined to be included on it, said Claudia Tuck, director of the Division of Human & Veteran Services.

"They felt they shouldn't be the one honored with that, and someone else should be honored," she said. "They were very humbled."

The idea for the Purple Bus came from County Commissioner Mary Lou Berger, who was inspired after seeing something similar elsewhere in Florida.

For the last six months or so, her office has been working on it with the Division of Human & Veteran Services and the local Military Order of the Purple Heart, which is headed by Mates and paid the approximately \$7,000 cost of the wrap.

Berger said she's passionate about veterans issues and making those who have served aware of what's available to them.

"There's a special place in my heart because of the veterans that have served in my family," she said. "And when you watch people come back and struggle, you can't help but want to help them to get everything that's owed to them."

The bus was unveiled during a Memorial Day ceremony in Boca Raton, with the featured veterans and their families in attendance. Those at the event checked out the bus and snapped photos of the veterans standing in front of their pictures.

A day later, it started running on Route 1, which takes U.S. 1 from Mercado Real in Boca Raton to the Gardens Mall in Palm Beach Gardens. It'll be on Palm Beach County roadways until Labor Day.

"Plenty of people will see it," Mates said. "Buses are hard to miss — especially this one."

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