

Accessibility, mobility and philanthropy are the spirit of ARBOC

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Today, ARBOC manufactures 500 buses per year and has three different lines of low-floor vehicles: The Spirit of Mobility, The Spirit of Freedom and the new Spirit of Liberty.

Since 2008, ARBOC Specialty Vehicles has created an entirely new market by creating low-floor small cutaway buses. Originally formed as ARBOC Mobility LLC, this Middlebury, Ind.-based low-floor vehicle company merged with All American Specialty Vehicles in 2011 to create ARBOC Specialty Vehicles, a single entity that handles the manufacturing, engineering, marketing and sales of their unique technology.

THE MARKET NEED

Don Roberts, president/CEO of ARBOC Specialty Vehicles, explains the idea behind the company was to provide accessibility for passengers of all abilities. He says that looking back over the transit bus history, every available option was high-floor, even in big city buses. Over time, large transit buses transitioned to low-floor options, but there was still nothing in the small cutaway business that allowed for low-floor options. This made it impossible for people in wheelchairs to load or unload themselves.

“Accessibility for people in wheelchairs used to mean they had to be put on a lift, put up in the air and pushed inside. This puts them in a spotlight, so

to speak,” Roberts says. “The other passengers would see them sitting there waiting to be loaded. If it’s raining outside or it’s snowing or it’s cold or it’s hot, they are out there.”

After extensive market research, ARBOC knew the need was there. Ken Becker, ARBOC’s sales manager, explains that as the baby boomer generation ages, there is a bigger demand for accessibility for passengers with walking aids and wheelchairs that will just keep growing — there are 57 million people with disabilities in the U.S., and 92% of all large transit buses are now ramp accessible. It made perfect sense for there to be a cutaway product developed in the same vein.

The solution was simple, but also, complex. With an ingenious patented design by ARBOC Founder Jim Bartel, Roberts explains that by adding a ramp to the interior of the small cutaway bus, it moves people in wheelchairs into the front as well as the back of the bus. ARBOC refers to this new range of mobility as random access. The result is a significantly decreased load time and an option for people using wheelchairs, scooters or electric chairs to load themselves. This acces-

sibility gives them a better sense of independence.

THE PRESENT

Today, ARBOC manufactures 500 buses per year and has three different lines of low-floor vehicles: the Spirit of Mobility, the Spirit of Freedom and the new Spirit of Liberty. Before the end of the year, ARBOC will ship its 2000th bus. With this rapid success, the company is evaluating ways to grow and expand while continuing to provide accessibility for everyone.

ARBOC has made significant redesigns to both the Spirit of Mobility and the Spirit of Freedom lines to be launched for the 2015 year. These are to include new style front fiberglass caps and a new ABS interior to match, made by the automotive design house, Tangent Designs. Plus, the company is changing the suspension to one created by Reyco Granning, which offers nationally recognized suspension packages.

Additionally, ARBOC partnered with Freightliner Custom Chassis to build an exclusive chassis for the Liberty model. The chassis frame rails for the Mobility and Freedom products are



Through its Spirit of Alexandria Charitable Foundation, ARBOC has connected over 80,000 children to nature.

built by EA Technologies, which are completely E-Coated to prevent corrosion. The results will be a totally new look, easily recognized as an ARBOC.

Roberts says the company is also pursuing other market possibilities, such as hybrid and electric models, in addition to offering gas, diesel, propane and CNG options, currently. ARBOC, as the largest under 30-foot bus manufacturer, has sold vehicles to more than 120 transit agencies in the last five years, including the Dallas Area Rapid Transit system, which operates 123 ARBOC CNG buses.

Any changes or improvements ARBOC makes to its vehicles are entirely customer driven, Roberts says. He and his team don’t wait for a model change if a new initiative needs to be implemented. Instead, they’ll change it right away.

The latest applied and specially-patented technology is a 12-degree angled door on the Spirit of Freedom. This patented design allows for a passenger in a wheelchair to follow the natural curve of the bus rather than having to turn 90-degrees upon loading. The company exceeds all federal ADA regulations because of its 1:6 ramp angle.

THE SPIRIT OF GIVING

ARBOC’s commitment to improving lives does not end with its vehicles. The company strives to give back as well and as often as they can.

When the granddaughter of Jim Bartel passed away suddenly in 2006, the family created a foundation in her honor. For the last nine years, ARBOC has helped fund the Spirit of Alexandria Charitable Foundation as the organization works

to connect children to nature. Alexandria Bartel loved being outdoors, attending road trips with Roberts and her grandfather to places like Yellowstone National Park as they demoed early versions of their buses. Since her death, the foundation has connected over 80,000 children to nature.

Since the Spirit of Alexandria began, the foundation has used converted ARBOC vehicles into classrooms at the Howell Nature Center in Michigan and the Raptor Center birds of prey res-

cue. These centers give presentations at different schools to educate about birds of prey. The Teton Science School has also participated to send kids every year to commune and spend time with nature.

“It’s all about the kids and nature and what life should be about,” Roberts says. “It’s amazing how many kids in cities don’t really know what nature is really like. The Spirit of Alexandria Foundation is giving them an opportunity to go out and see it.”