



(Photo by Dan Klapheke, Illinois Valley News)

Mary Rolfe, bus driver for 36 years, with her No. 3 bus Friday, June 10.

Bus driver retires after 36 years of service

By Dan Klapheke
IVN Staff Writer

After 36 years as a school bus driver in Cave Junction, Mary Rolfe is lifting her foot off the pedal.

Rolfe started as a bus driver for the Three Rivers School District in 1980, when her first child was in first grade.

"I actually seen this little tiny lady driving this great big yellow bus, and I thought, 'She can do it, I can do it,'" Rolfe said. "Then a month and a half I was doing it."

Rolfe has driven under two bus numbers since she started, the first being No. 4 and the second No. 3. Her earlier routes were in Selma, but most have been in Cave Junction.

Rolfe doesn't remember what year she got the bus she drives now. But to put it in perspective, she got the bus at 500 miles and it now has 386,000 miles.

"I just was thinking about this the other day and I thought, 'I've had this bus since it was new,'" Rolfe said. "It's cool."

Over those miles, Rolfe said what's changed most is the behavior of her riders.

"The disrespect, it's awful," Rolfe said. "That's why my last two years have been really hard to hang in there because my boys never acted that way. Not even in their adults lives."

Until an alternative school was set up, Rolfe said dealing with poor behavior was one of the most challenging aspects of the job.

"Especially on the other kids having to watch that they were getting away with it," Rolfe said. "So that was really hard, you know, driving the bus and having this person flying off the handle is not good."

Despite behavioral issues, Rolfe said she loved picking up the children and dropping them off, and the children themselves.

"All those little people, and the bigger ones that wanna hug and we can't hug," Rolfe said. "And the little ones, they do sneak in those little hugs. They're so cute."

Rolfe has driven the bus long enough to drive children of her former riders, as well as her own children and grandchildren.

"I have two," Rolfe said, referring to her

own children. "Not counting all the ones I've had on my bus."

Among the Three Rivers School District bus drivers, Rolfe has the most years under her belt by a long shot. Mel, another driver, is the closest with 16 years.

"She's a good person," Mel said. "Really good person. Thirty-six years; that says a lot." Bob Madden, a third year driver, joked about how long Rolfe had been at it.

"They still had holes in the floor cut out for your feet," Madden said, laughing. "When Mary started we were all still in diapers."

Ron Baker, a sixth year driver, chimed in as well.

"Trees don't live that long," Baker said. "She'll be back," Madden said.

"She'll miss us too much," Baker added. "She's gotta come back."

The bus drivers are family, Rolfe said, and it's one of her favorite parts of the job.

Rolfe doesn't leave the Valley much--her first time leaving the area was in 1987, when she flew to Atlanta to look at used buses. But Rolfe said she does have travel plans.

"Up Caves Highway to the campground," Rolfe said as to where she'll be going.

"Twenty miles or so down the road there's a nice campground, too. Maybe Crescent City."

Rolfe's retirement plans are mostly in Cave Junction.

"My yard needs my attention," Rolfe said as for what she'll be doing. She's also excited about spending more time with her mother, which will give Rolfe's sister time off from taking care of her.

To celebrate Rolfe's retirement, her fellow bus drivers set up a surprise potluck lunch Friday, June 10, at the bus garage beside Evergreen Elementary School. Rolfe's co-workers brought food and hid in the garage, then bombarded her with silly string once she got back from her route before she even got to the door.

Inside the garage, a table with flowers, cards and gifts was set up. It brought Rolfe to tears.

"They just..." Rolfe said, then trailed off, choking up. "I mean more to them than what I thought. It's awesome."

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