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AARON STEBBINS,
CATHERINE PICKUP
AND JIM EVANGELISTA
OF REALITY KITCHEN

PHOTO BY TRASK BEDORTHA

REALITY KITCHEN'S DOUGHY TREAT CART ROLLS INTO THE BUS STATION BY AMY KLARUP

"I can ramble," Jim Evangelista warns me with a twinkle in his eye as we sit down in his bakery off River Road. "And I've got lots to talk about."

Evangelista does have lots to talk about — mostly words of praise for all the people, organizations and institutions that came together to make the nonprofit Eugene bakery Reality Kitchen and its brand-new pretzel food cart a rollicking success.

On Aug. 18, Lane Transit District finalized an agreement with Evangelista to place Reality Kitchen's *Pinocchio*-inspired food cart at the LTD bus station in downtown Eugene.

"It's a remarkable opportunity," Evangelista says.

Evangelista is something of a jolly gnome, wearing overalls and a ready smile. He and Catherine Pickup, his wife, founded Reality Kitchen with the goal of creating a space for young adults with developmental or intellectual disabilities to pick up job skills and gain experience.

According to the Oregon Council on Developmental Disabilities, "the vast majority of Oregonians with developmental disabilities are underemployed or unemployed despite their demonstrated ability to become valued employees."

Places like Reality Kitchen provide an environment where intellectually disabled workers interact with neurotypical workers and practice being in a community workplace, meeting with customers and taking part in every step of production, from baking to delivery.

Evangelista and Pickup have worked out of their bakery off River Road since 2013, and while Evangelista is happy to talk about Reality Kitchen's history, he's especially eager to shine the spotlight on his newest project, the Pretzel Wagon.

"I know that it will stick in people's minds," Evangelista says, and it's hard to disagree with him. Hand-painted by Evangelista and Pickup, the cart radiates charisma with its teal-painted wooden paneling, bright red trim and lemon yellow detailing.

Evangelista modeled the cart on the villainous Stromboli's puppet wagon from *Pinocchio*, complete with antique-looking decorations and old-fashioned door hinges. The design evokes the theatrical flair of a set piece — not surprising, considering Evangelista's background in mural painting and theater.

He says he and Pickup credit friend and neighbor Barbara Morseth, who passed away in 2013, with the cart's creative vibe.

"She was in the theater and was old-school Eugene," Evangelista says of Morseth. "We were talking with Barbara one day trying to come up with a design, and she said, 'Well, it's gotta be colorful! It's gotta be imaginative!'"

Evangelista says Morseth encouraged the couple as they spent time on the cart, helping to paint it or reading to the couple as they worked.

Reality Kitchen received a grant from the R.W. Family Fund of the Oregon Community Foundation to pay for initial construction

costs, and before they knew it, what started as a stripped-down boat trailer had turned into a mobile pretzel-dispensing unit — except for the inside.

"It got to a point where I couldn't do the finishing details, the interior work, some of the things that would make it up to code," Evangelista says. "It was languishing, and I was really frustrated because I wanted to get this thing done."

That's when McKenzie Commercial, the contractor working on Eugene City Hall, entered the project after Evangelista reached out for advice.

"The cart looked really nice," says Todd Glenz, principal owner of McKenzie Commercial, "but it needed some interior finishing, so we got some help from the local contractors that we generally work with and basically took what he had built and made it work."

A number of local building companies collaborated to work on the cart, including the Eugene Builders Exchange, McKenzie Glass, Tom's Plumbing, Reynolds Electric and more.

Together, they installed a new roof and flooring, added plumbing, recoated the interior with plastic panels, added a window and hinges to one of the doors and fixed the hot water heater.

"We were so grateful for that opportunity and for the work that they did," Evangelista says. "It's all contribution. I can't thank them enough."

Evangelista says he knew he wanted to place the cart in a highly visible spot — both the University of Oregon campus and Kesey Square were under consideration.

But when the opportunity for a partnership with LTD came up, Evangelista knew it was the right choice.

"The whole idea is to use this as an alternate setting so that it's this imaginative, creative unit that goes out in the community and creates this other setting that folks in our program get to utilize and work on," Evangelista says.

"The public gets to understand and see what they are capable of," he continues. "It's about changing perceptions of the community around what the employment options are for people who experience intellectual and development disabilities. To do that in a way that is meaningful and gives them employment skills — that's the whole point."

Evangelista says his staff is excited and looking forward to trying out the cart, which will sell Reality Kitchen's signature Bavarian-style pretzels. Chewy, doughy and perfectly salted, the pretzels are satisfyingly savory and more delicious than any pretzel has a right to be.

The Pretzel Wagon will also sell soups, scones, pastries and drinks, and Evangelista plans to rotate the menu based on the season — look out for cinnamon apple, bacon-filled and chocolate pretzels.

"It will be the perfect spot," Evangelista says with a smile.

The Pretzel Wagon is located at the LTD bus station. For more information, keep up with Reality Kitchen on Facebook.