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LOCAL INFORMATION & ADVERTISING

Roadrunner Bus transporting kids into nature

By **LAUREL ROBERTSON**

Getting inner city kids to have a good time out in nature is pretty easy — the hard part is getting them to nature, says Westcave Outdoor Discover Center's Children in Nature coordinator, Addie Broussard.

Though the 75-acre nature preserve west of Dripping Springs offers discounted rates for low-income schools, they learned that the significant costs of transporting kids from inner-cities to far-away outdoor education programs often prevents lower-income schools from being able to take part. To address that problem, Westcave Preserve recently purchased The Roadrunner Outdoor Adventure Bus to make it more affordable for schools to get kids out into nature.

Westcave began fundraising for the Roadrunner Bus at their Celebration of Children in Nature Awards Gala in the

fall of 2014. The Gala raised \$25K towards the \$125K needed to fund the bus for its first three years.

In 2015, the Children in Nature Collaborative of Austin (CiNCA), a community program fostered by Westcave to provide outdoor learning opportunities for kids, raised \$80K through a grant from the non-profit group, Impact Austin. The final \$20K came from a successful online crowdfunding campaign on Indiegogo.

One short year later, at the 2015 Celebration of Children in Nature Awards Gala, Westcave was able to unveil the newly purchased Roadrunner Bus to the host of thrilled donors.

The Roadrunner Bus began taking its first field trips last March.

Besides bringing kids out to Westcave, this summer the Roadrunner Bus has been providing free and discounted
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Grotto at Westcave Preserve west of Dripping Springs. Photo by Mike Murphy.



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Staff aboard the Westcave Preserve Roadrunner Outdoor Adventure Bus. LEFT TO RIGHT Addie Broussard, Executive Director Molly Stevens, Jane Jones, Linda Wofford and Ryan Spencer. Photo courtesy Westcave Preserve.

transportation for school field trips and summer programs to the Science Mill in Johnson City, the Sustainable Food Center in Austin, El Ranchito summer camp on the Shield Ranch near Dripping Springs, and Discovery Hill — an outdoor learning garden at Pleasant Hill Elementary in South Austin. The bus will also be available for use by the other 54 local organizations in CiNCA . It provided shuttle service for Earth Day last April at

the Mueller development. Since its charter allows the bus to travel anywhere in Texas, many more opportunities to bring kids out to nature-based field trips are in its future.

As part of ongoing fundraising, ad space will be available to rent on the exterior of the Roadrunner Bus for nature-based businesses and non-profits. Through a \$10K grant from 3M Company, the bus will get “wrapped” with graphic

designs. Winners of a Roadrunner drawing contest among art students in Austin ISD will have their works printed on the commercially-produced wrap, which will be installed this month.

Westcave Outdoor Discovery Center is engaged in several other community-based outdoor learning opportunities. As a partner in a new Cities Connecting Children to Nature (CCCN) grant, the group will help plan how to better connect children with nature. The \$25K grant will help teams from the City of Austin, Austin Independent School District, The University of Texas - Austin and non-profit community organizations (including Westcave) analyze and assess how to improve community efforts to get children and their families engaged with the outdoors in Texas.



Jim Nix Grotto at Westcave Preserve. Photo courtesy Westcave Preserve.

September 16, Westcave will host the ninth annual Children in Nature Awards Dinner at the Four Seasons Hotel in Austin to recognize those in the community focused on getting local children out into nature. Carter Smith, Executive Director of Texas Parks & Wildlife Department, will serve as Master of Ceremonies for the event. At the dinner, Westcave will announce four award winners chosen for their excellence in connecting children to nature. Proceeds from the event go to CiNCA.

FYI • Westcave Outdoor Discovery Center is located

on Hamilton Pool Road (Ranch Road 3238), just west of the Pedernales River crossing. Access to the acres of Upland Trails is available Tuesday through Friday from 10 AM to 2 PM and weekends from 9:30 AM to 4 PM. Guided tours of the grotto are offered Saturday and Sunday at 10 AM, noon, 2 PM and 4 PM on a first-come, first-served basis. Friday summer tours are available through August 12. The Preserve is closed Mondays. Weekday field trip or groups tours are available Tuesday through Friday by reservation.

The 2016 Celebration of Children in Nature Awards Dinner will be September 16, from 6 PM to 9 PM at the Four Seasons Hotel in Austin. For tickets and more information about Westcave Preserve, visit the web site at westcave.org.

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Kids board the Roadrunner Outdoor Adventure Bus to travel to a week-long residential, nature immersion camp. Photo courtesy Westcave Preserve.