

## PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release

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Caption: An artist rendering of WoW's design

Caption: The WoW team -- artist David Williams, supervisory refuge ranger Toni Westland, and DDWS development officer Sierra Hoisington -- recently tried out the WoW mobile classroom shell for size.

### **Donors fund truck purchase for 'Ding' Darling's WoW mobile classroom**

The "Ding" Darling Wildlife Society-Friends of the Refuge (DDWS) recently received a donation from the Bluedorn Family of Sanibel Island and Dallas to purchase a heavy-duty truck to tow the "Ding" Darling Refuge's Wildlife on Wheels (WoW) mobile classroom.

"That was the last piece of the puzzle to put together the 'traveling refuge' unit to extend the refuge's educational reach to at-risk communities and people in the five-county area who are unable to visit 'Ding' Darling," said DDWS executive director Birgie Miller. "We are so thrilled that Barbara Bluedorn found the project captivating because of the importance of its outreach mission to her family."

The Wow mobile classroom will travel to distant schools, libraries, after-school programs, events, and other venues to teach and inspire people of all ages to save and protect land, water, and the wildlife that need that habitat to survive.

The educational WoW project for the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel Island began with an anonymous \$100,000 family grant last spring. Later, another donor contributed a \$50,000 challenge grant that brought in another \$100,000 toward WoW's completion. Donations have arrived from refuge friends and education supporters across the country.

"All of the donors to this long dreamed-of project believe in education as the key component to making a difference in protecting what is left in our world for the wildlife and the people who depend on it," said supervisory refuge ranger Toni Westland, who leads the project with DDWS development officer Sierra Hoisington. "We are always looking for new and creative ways to engage people of all ages in conservation. We are so excited about the possibilities of teaching and inspiring in hard-to-reach

communities through WoW.”

Currently in its fabrication stage, WoW will be unveiled late March as part of the refuge’s 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration. DDWS hopes to hire a coordinator-educator, who, along with volunteers and interns, will staff the museum-quality, hands-on exhibits inside and outside of WoW to maximize their inspirational learning potential.

Learning stations will interpret mangrove ecosystems, water quality, water conservation, pollution and plastic, animal scats and tracks, Florida’s native animals, wildlife sounds, and other topics that meet the refuge’s mission.

Refuge staff, Lee County teachers, and a team of volunteers will draw on knowledge gained in the classroom to design the interpretative exhibits and programs that complement Florida educational requirements.

“The refuge will continue bringing schools here by bus -- nearly 5,000 students annually,” said Westland. “But our WoW mobile classroom will allow refuge staff to reach thousands of more kids and their families who are otherwise unable to experience the outdoors at the refuge.”

Anyone interested in making a tax-deductible donation for ongoing needs for the WoW project can contact Miller at 239-472-1100 ext. 4 or [director@dingdarlingsociety.org](mailto:director@dingdarlingsociety.org).

#### ABOUT DDWS

As a non-profit 501(c)3 organization, DDWS works to support J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge’s mission of conservation, wildlife and habitat protection, research, and public education through charitable donations and Refuge Nature Shop profits.

To support DDWS and the refuge with a tax-deductible gift, visit [dingdarlingsociety.org](http://dingdarlingsociety.org) or contact Birgie Miller at 239-472-1100 ext. 4 or [director@dingdarlingsociety.org](mailto:director@dingdarlingsociety.org).

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