

The ToyMakers of East Lake **Volunteers build toys for children in need**

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PALM HARBOR – Bob Helms calls them his little elves: 220 volunteers that flit in and out of the workshop throughout the day, week and year, building wooden toys by hand. Except they don't just work in December.

Some come once a month, others weekly. Some are there every day.

"Our youngest volunteer is 13 and our oldest is 95, and we've got everything in between," said Helms, the president of the ToyMakers board.



Photo by JAY RICHMOND

Paulene Hendricks paints a wooden toy.

And every day, dozens of these volunteers sit around the ToyMakers of East Lake warehouse, running down a detailed checklist to put together wooden toys that are then donated to hospitals, police stations and other nonprofit organizations.

Inside the ToyMakers storage area are thousands of toys: ambulances and race cars, school buses and helicopters. Last year, the organization produced 10,000 toys; this year, they're aiming for 12,000.

"It's about us giving back to the community," said Gabe Macke, the customer service manager at the Brooker Creek Publix, who volunteers with his coworkers regularly.

Because so many of the volunteers come and go, Helms devised a project worksheet, a 34-step process that details everything from tracing the patterns to painting to assembling wheels and axles. Each step is initialed upon completion, allowing the next volunteer to pick up right where the list left off.

The most popular toys are Batmobiles, Helms said, but kids like the animals too: ducks and sharks and turtles and horses. For those unable to grip the 3/4-inch thick wood, the organization has begun making some with handles that the kids can use to roll their new toy.

Maggie Derousie, a retired schoolteacher, began volunteering last year as a way to stay busy.

"I wanted to do something for kids," she said. "They're the nicest people here, and it's a great workplace. And we're helping little kids that need help."

The ToyMakers also have created variations on their projects for different scenarios: puzzles for kids undergoing dialysis and ducks on sticks to encourage children going through rehabilitation to continue their exercise.

“We’ve been doing this long enough that we know the special situations,” Helms said.

The ToyMakers of East Lake has been doing just that since 2007, as an outreach mission of the East Lake United Methodist Church.

And over the years, their system has grown outside of their small workshop. They get donations from Rotary clubs, construction companies and police departments, in the form of money and supplies. Sherwin Williams in Trinity donates all the paint. Augustine Construction and Creative Visions Remodeling recently collaborated to construct an outdoor shed to house the noisier equipment. Sheriff’s departments have donated logo stickers to create realistic police cars.

“It’s a community effort,” Helms said. “We get help from a lot of people; they all jumped in to help.”

Three years ago, they also started a student board with three members who fully participate in board discussions.

“We thought it was a great idea to give students the opportunity to participate in adult decisions,” Helms said.

Already, some of those students have gone onto the engineering program at East Lake High School and to summer internships in manufacturing and robotics. The benefits, Helms said, are almost instantaneous.

Nathan Harper and Jason Hickman, seniors at Palm Harbor University High School, spent their summers fixing bicycles in a corner of the warehouse. Between 375 and 400 bikes are fixed and donated every year to homeless working adults, returning veterans and children in need.

“It’s great to help,” Hickman, 17, said.

At any point, between 4,000 and 5,000 toys are in the process of being built. Another 3,500 wait in the inventory room to be picked up for delivery, where they’ll be sent locally to the All Children’s Outpatient Care in East Lake and East Lake Fire Rescue and around the state to places like the Ronald McDonald House in Gainesville and the St. Petersburg Free Clinic. Police officers and staff from family services keep toys in their cars, destined for children taken from their homes and into unknown situations.

“Kids are in the hospital every single day. They’re in bad situations every day,” Helms said. “We’re trying to make it a little easier for them.”

The ToyMakers of East Lake will host an open house and silent auction Saturday, Nov. 7, 9:30 a.m. to noon, at 2690 Tanglewood Trail, Palm Harbor.

For more information, including how to volunteer or donate to ToyMakers of East Lake, visit www.toymakersofeastlake.com.

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