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Volunteers make old-school toys for kids throughout Pinellas

By KATE BRADSHAW



A handful of people, all volunteers, are spending the morning in an old golf shed chipping away at small chunks of wood, fashioning them into cars, fire trucks and letters of the alphabet. One paints wheels; one mans the bandsaw; another smooths the surface of the old-school toys with sandpaper.

As part of the ToyMakers of East Lake, the volunteers are making a batch of toys they will deliver throughout the year to local children's hospitals, fire departments, women's shelters and other nonprofit organizations as far away as Gainesville.

Jon Little, now in his sixth year crafting toys, jokes that the work helps retirees such as him stay productive.

"Keeps us off the streets," he says.

The toys are nearly all wood. No plastic, no flashing lights, no sharp parts. Many are cars — some are blue, with Spider-Man decals for the boys; others are pink, with princess decals for the girls. To some, they're a throwback to a time when toys didn't require batteries or resemble characters from the latest animated blockbuster.

To small children escaping an abusive household with their mothers and little more than the clothes on their backs, the toys can take their minds off the violence and pain they've fled.

"Sometimes Mom has been able to scrape up a couple of toys, or blankets, but they really haven't brought much from home," says Chris Warwick, director of the Haven at Religious Community Services, a shelter for abused women in Clearwater that receives several crates full of the toys throughout the year.

Giving away the toys helps show children who have grown accustomed to constant yelling and violence that they're safe at the facility, Warwick says.

"It's incredulous to them, because they've lived in a house with a lot of violence," Warwick says. "This gives us the opportunity to be nice."

ToyMakers is the Pinellas County counterpart to a workshop of the same name in New Port Richey. Little says the drive to Pasco got a little taxing for some of the volunteers, so they started their own shop in Palm Harbor around 2006. The Pasco shop was launched in 1982, when founder Ray McCallugh visited his grandson at All Children's Hospital and saw that there were no toys for the kids to play with.

"Everyone said 'Oh, bring us some more,'" Little says.

McCullagh, his wife and some friends then began making toys. The Pinellas workshop donates to nonprofit groups such as the Ronald McDonald House, East Lake Fire Department and the Spring of Tampa. After disasters such as the Haiti earthquake or Hurricane Sandy, toys go to displaced victims.

The nonprofit has made more than 250,000 toys.

The workshop also has started refurbishing old bicycles to give to adults and children, something Warwick says can be a key component helping families regain some mobility.

For information, go to www.toymakersofeastlake.org.

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