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ToyMakers putting a smile on a child's face one toy at a time

By MEGAN HOLZWARTH, TBN Correspondent Dec 18, 2018



Bob Helms, president of ToyMakers since 2009, joined the organization after seeing some of their toys on a display at a church.
Photo by MEGAN HOLZWARTH

PALM HARBOR – Laying in a hospital bed scared and lonely wondering what will happen next. Staring at the wall waiting. Wishing you could be anywhere else.

Watching all the doctors and nurses run by and playing with the IV in your arm.

A nurse walks in with a hand-crafted wooden toy. The child's face lights up with excitement. After being stuck in this room for days he finally has a smile on their face.

The child's family finds out that the toy was provided from ToyMakers of East Lake. A nonprofit organization that makes hand-crafted wooden toys for sick and needy children, they also repair and recycle bikes for children, returning military personnel and homeless working adults.

The toys are donated to agencies such as Tampa General Hospital, Ronald McDonald Houses, Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital, clinics, homeless and abuse shelters.

ToyMakers of East Lake has been running since November 2007. So far it has 19,000 toys this year

Bob Helms, president of ToyMakers since 2009, joined the organization after seeing some of their toys on a display at a church. He noticed that they were made of wood and thought he could make those, too, being a woodworker.

Helms's favorite part about running the organization is that he doesn't really direct what happens every day.

"We have a 36-step project plan for making toys. We set it up so that each step ends up in a box that's labeled with what that step is," Helms said.

This way no one is managed. They can come in and do any step that they know how to do. The workers can focus on certain skills that they're good at and learn new ones as well.

Jim Rosenburg, a toymaker, said his favorite part is delivering the toys and seeing the children's faces when they receive the toy.

The challenge that Helms faces is that they grew so fast.

"We started with 2,000 toys a year when I started on the board. We went to 4,000 to 6,000 to 8,000 to 12,000 to 14,000 then we got some new equipment and jumped to 18,000," Helms said.

One of the most rewarding things is receiving help from the community from money to material donations to help keep ToyMakers running, Helms said.

Twenty to 50 of the nearly 300 volunteers come in on one of the days they are open. The youngest volunteer is 13 and the oldest is 99.

Volunteers must be at least 13 years old and have parental consent if they are minors. They must fill out two forms: a photography release and a liability release form.

Helms loves when the students come and volunteer. They learn about the manufacturing process and other aspects of ToyMakers, which also has some student board members.

ToyMakers, a large outreach ministry based on property owned by the East Lake United Methodist Church, makes all different kinds of toys for the children, from wooden ducks to princess cars. Their most popular toys are the helicopter and batmobile.

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Some of the toys made help children who need to exercise. For example, a toy that has a dog on it with a long stick lets a child walk their toy and get their exercise.

The organization also helps fix bikes in the community. They have repaired and given 600 bikes for children and adults in the last year. Bikes are donated to homeless working adults.

ToyMakers annual silent auction was held Nov. 3. Participants bid on gifts, have a tour of the workshop and meet the toymakers. Games for the kids and food and drinks are provided.

Helms said the event went well and has been operating for four to five years.

Half of the items that are sold at the auction are made from the toymakers themselves, including Christmas ornaments, birdhouses, cutting boards, toolboxes and more.

ToyMakers is located on property owned by The East Lake United Methodist Church.

Helms explained why working at ToyMakers is rewarding.

“It’s not just doing something great for somebody, it’s not just giving people something worthwhile to do, but the individual joy of achievement,” Helms said.

Located at 2690 Tanglewood Trail, ToyMakers hours are from 8 a.m. to noon on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday.

Email toys@toymakersofeastlake.org.