

### Toys made the old-fashioned way

ToyMakers produces wooden toys for kids in need

By KATHRYN WILLIAMS

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PALM HARBOR – Camouflaged amongst the trees, ToyMakers of East Lake sits in an unobtrusive location in the Tarpon Woods neighborhood of East Lake.

ToyMakers is a nonprofit, volunteer based organization that produces hand-made wooden toys to sick or in need kids in stressful situations.

The original ToyMakers group began in Pasco County in 1982.



Photo by KATHRYN WILLIAMS

Toys line the walls in the toyshop.

“We were going up to New Port Richey,” said Gene Watson, a current volunteer and one of the original ToyMakers. “Some ... started going up with me.”

Since then, the charity has moved to its current inconspicuous location in Palm Harbor.

“Everything here is donated,” said Bob Helms president of ToyMakers, referring to the two giant storage containers outside the main building, old CSX containers donated by the train organization.

Sherwin Williams donated their paint, and they painted the building and the containers a dark green to make the company as inconspicuous as possible.

“We try to be good neighbors,” Helms said.

What happens inside the green building, however, is where the magic happens.

### Making the Toys

The workshop at ToyMakers is a well-organized machine, though each step comes from a place of caring.

Every toy at ToyMakers is made of hardwood, and yet there is no dust in the air amidst all of the woodwork.

A piping system pulls all of the sawdust from the tools and machines in the room to an intricate dust collection vacuum system, a helpful system as every toy at ToyMakers must be sanded.

“Sand the outside, sand the edges,” Helms said. “We’re making these for children coming out of surgery.”

Surgery is just one of the many reasons a child may receive one of the wooden toys. Helms said everything is built out of hardwood for kids in distress.

“Things made of wood seem to be more soothing,” Helms said.

Helms also said for the in-need children who receive donations, wood toys do not need expensive batteries that families in financial crisis cannot afford to replace.

“[Wooden toys] are something they can always make the noises,” Helms said. “A needy child is happy to get anything.”

Because of the circumstances in which children are receiving toys, the goal at ToyMakers is to make every toy look cheerful and feel good.

“We have over 100 templates,” Helms said. “They are pre-approved by the board.”

Some toys are made for kids with specific injuries.

J-cars are made special for kids that have a hard time with their grip.

Some are made based on how they came to the hospital, shelter or police station. Kids that come in by helicopter get a helicopter while they are en route. Then, when they arrive at their location, there’s usually a toy box for the children to pick whatever toy they’d like.

“We want it to be special,” Helms said. “We recently started making a panda.”

The ToyMakers themselves often carry toys in their briefcases just in case they come across a child upset or crying.

Special consideration is taken to make sure the toys are of the best quality for the kids.

For example, because they don’t want the wheels to fall off, there is a special process for attaching wheels to the cars. The wheels are painted while mounted on straws to make sure paint does not get inside the hole.

“Wood glue will not stick to paint,” Helms said.

Twelve racks that hold 500 wheels at a time were specially made as drying racks.

“We mount 60,000 wheels a year,” Helms said.

Every toy takes a little over an hour and a half to complete and there is a specific process each volunteer must follow so the process doesn’t get held up.

Volunteers follow a project worksheet of 36 steps starting with filling out the worksheet with items like the toys description, wheel size and colors and ending with final child safety inspection and bagging of the toy.

Because each volunteer is not there everyday, a new volunteer can come in, pick up the worksheet, and start back up where the last volunteer left off.

To expedite the process, when holes are dilled for axels or rough edges are sanded down, 50 toys are done at a time.

In 2009, ToyMakers made 2,000 toys. In 2015, it was 12,000. For 2016, the estimate is 15,000 toys.

The other side of ToyMakers, however, is their bike refurbishment and donations. The organization donated 425 bikes last year.

“All of our bikes are donated,” Helms said.

The bikes that can't be refurbished are broken down for parts to repair the bicycles that can be, making the cost to repair a single bike \$1.26.

They are then donated to homeless needy adults looking for work. ToyMakers actually sent some bicycles to Chile and Haiti when the counties experienced national disasters.

## **Meet the volunteers**

ToyMakers has a little over 200 volunteers spanning from the oldest at 97 and the youngest at 13. A couple of the volunteers are actual World War II veterans.

“We've grown since [Helms] been president,” said Ray Jacobs.

Helms prides himself on the fact that they have no paid staff. They are all volunteer-based. In addition to that, none of their money donations go toward administrative costs.

“Some students come in and help make the toys,” Helms said.

Kids come to volunteer for various reasons. Many of the students are finishing their Bright Futures volunteer hours. Kids from robotics clubs come by to repair bikes. The organization even has two student board members who have the ability to learn about running a nonprofit.

“We don't have a cap on volunteers,” Helms said.

The schedule is easy. Some people come everyday, some only work mornings, others one or two days a week.

ToyMakers has created a system so that volunteers can see what needs to be done for the day and

choose what they'd like to work on.

"We empower the people to make the decision on what they're going to work on," Helms said.

In addition to their volunteers, local business, people and organizations donate to ToyMakers. Home Depot supplies the paint for their toys; Publix donates the bags the toys are placed in and the boxes used to contain them.

Much of the wood comes from the scrap of wood mills, pieces too small to be used in projects.

Jacobs said that some local people would donate used equipment to the organization while others will buy it new.

### **Future fundraisers**

To pay for their utilities, gas, axels and band saw blades, ToyMakers holds fundraisers and auctions.

The next event will be held Nov. 5, next door to the toyshop at Fellowship Hall of East Lake United Methodist Church, 2801 East Lake Road, Palm Harbor.

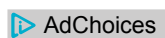
There will be an open house from 10 a.m. to noon, and the auction will occur at 10 to 11:30 a.m.

For more information on toymakers visit [toymakrsofeastlake.org](http://toymakrsofeastlake.org).

*Revised date of next ToyMakers event.*

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