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Toymakers stories from Eastlake

Nonprofit group, volunteers helps sick, needy youngsters

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Toymakers of East Lake is a volunteer based nonprofit organization located at 2690 Tanglewood Trail in Palm Harbor that produces thousands of toys that are distributed to sick and needy kids in the Tampa Bay area and beyond every year.

JEFF ROSENFELD

EAST LAKE — On the surface the story of Toymakers of East Lake, a volunteer-based nonprofit group that started in 2007 as an East Lake United Methodist Church outreach mission, is a feel-good tale in itself.

Volunteers of all ages donate time— while others donate money, supplies and equipment—to help build colorful, wooden toys for sick and needy children.

But a visit to the Toymakers' workshop at 2690 Tanglewood Trail revealed there is more to the story of how those volunteers transform a blank block of wood into a rolling smile generator in 36 easy steps.

According to Bob Helms, president of the Toymakers board of directors, the group, which meets in four hour sessions four times a week, appeals to people of all ages, from middle schoolers to nonagenarians, for a variety of reasons.

"We typically have 25 to 50 volunteers depending on the day and time of year, and we have over 300 total members," he said, noting their youngest volunteer is 13 and the oldest 99. "There's no schedule. They can come and go when they want. We have a unique process, with 36 steps to make the toy, and they can do any step they feel comfortable with. We have skilled jobs and unskilled jobs, from running bandsaws to bagging. Anybody who wants to help make toys, there's a job for them."

Helms, a longtime veteran of the telecommunications industry who was the CEO of five companies, said he has run the toymaking outfit like a business since taking over leadership about a decade ago.

"We're a toy factory," he said. "We run it just like a business, we have a board and procedures. We keep improving the process and production has almost doubled. We'll deliver 20,000 toys this year, 5,000 every quarter, to 40 different agencies, including battered women's shelters, food and hurricane victims, kids in hospitals. Anyone in need."

He also noted they hold two major fundraising events every year and are always seeking donations of everything from money to wood to machinery.

"We've been on TV six to eight times including national TV, and that really helps us raise money he said," adding since he retired from the corporate world, the toy factory is "pretty much a full-time job. But the passion for this is amazing."

Helms said in addition to the appeal of making toys for a great cause, each volunteer gets something different from being part of the group.

“Every student is learning roles and responsibilities,” he said, noting they host Bright Futures and other scholarship students and kids can get credits for clubs and other volunteer organizations. “And a lot of retirees suffer from depression, and this becomes their new identity. We give them meaning and purpose in life and a camaraderie, and that goes for the kids, too.”

Indeed, a quick canvas of the group during a mid-morning ice cream break revealed the members are as diverse as the reasons they attend.

Julian Cole, an incoming East Lake High School sophomore, said he returned to the group because he “just wanted to help the community, and for Bright Futures” credits.

The teen said he most enjoyed bagging the toys, and he also likes when Helms’ wife, Janet, asks the volunteers to go around the circle and introduce each other. “It’s like being part of a family,” he said.

Sitting at a nearby picnic table, 29-year-old Luma Panucci of Brazil explained how she’s staying in Oldsmar to learn English as a second language and decided to check out the group.

“I found out about this place, and heard that it helps people,” Panucci said, adding her first impression was “amazing. I like it. It’s very good.”

Inside the workshop, Bradenton resident Gary Pollard operated a bandsaw while his father, Thaddeus, 99, a former Navy Seal, sat nearby, greeting everybody who walked by.

“These are my friends,” Thaddeus said after receiving a hug from Janet Helms. “I love them. It’s what keeps me going.”

For Debbie Legnon of Tarpon Springs, her reason for joining four years ago was simple.

“I always enjoyed arts and crafts, and this allows me to do things I couldn’t do in high school,” Legnon said as she painted blue dots on grey whales. “It’s the art classes they never gave me in high school, and it’s for a good cause. It’s so nice to know we’re giving these to kids and it’s going to make those kids happy.”

As Gary Pollard noted, the meaning of why they are there is not lost on the volunteers.

“It’s great, great company and the feeling of handing these toys to kids in the hospital, if it doesn’t bring a tear to your eye, you’re not human,” Pollard said. “This is one of the most rewarding things I’ve ever done. As we like to say, we make kids smile, one toy at a time.”

To learn more about Toymakers of East Lake, visit toymakersofeastlake.org.

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