

Lenox Woodcrafter toys comfort the sick and dying

A homegrown toys outreach has expanded, providing a parts-assembly kit for adult day centers and a wooden heart memorial for families who've lost their children.

By Todd Svanoe

Santa's elves, move over! The hands of compassion at Lenox Woodcrafters both deliver toys year-round and put smiles on the faces of hundreds of children who may not make it to another holiday.

Saws whirl and sanders hum, as seniors become kids again, reproducing their line of 15 toys each Monday morning, 9 a.m.-noon, at Lenox Community Center. They've gifted 7,500 kids at Park-Nicollet Methodist, and Minneapolis and St. Paul Children's Hospitals since 2004.

"Most of these kids are cancer patients," said James Stelle, an original woodworking member. "Seeing their eyes light up is the satisfying part."

"Giving back to these children is one of the great pleasures in the world," said Bob Nelson, a retired dentist who applies his dexterity to wooden Indy-500 Racers, helicopters, space shuttles, and John Deere tractors.

The well-equipped workshop, open to the community weekdays, and providing beginner and intermediate classes (see below), has become both a rich senior resource and a vibrant outreach.

"It gives us purpose in life and keeps us out of pool halls, saloons, and casinos," laughed Jim Liska, who founded the toyshop to bring joy to kids at the Minneapolis Children's Hospital where he and his wife Marlys still volunteer.

"If you didn't have this, you'd probably mope around at home and get fat. Instead, my wife sees me going to a job every day."

"But without the lunch," joked Stelle.

In February, Liska received a call from a worker at the Minneapolis Children's Hospital who helps kids paint and personalize the uncolored toys, explained Liska.

"She asked if we would make hearts for a memorial service to present to families who have lost a child in the past year. I said, 'How many do you need?' She said, '85.' I said, 'You have 85 children die each year?!' She said, 'That's not even half of them, just the families who will be at the service.'"

Sam's Club contributed long-lasting hard plastic rods attached to the base of each heart so families could place them in flower gardens if they desired.

The Woodcrafters at one time dreamed of providing toys to every hospital and day care in the Twin Cities, and other recent invitations have underscored the immense impact additional workers could make.

"We've partnered with both Open Circle of Hopkins and Oak Knoll Lutheran in Minnetonka, providing those adult day programs with the toy pieces that they assemble as an occupational care activity," said Liska. "Then we deliver the toys to the hospitals."

"You'd be amazed at what goes out of here," said Lenox Senior Program Coordinator Rita Kach. "There's plenty of room in the shop, women included," she said, pointing to the group's regular woodcrafter Marian Schmidt as an example.

Dave Nelson came on board five years ago when he came to the Lenox workshop needing help completing an antique dining room table project. "Somebody helped me on the lathe. Then I made a computer desk, and had help when I needed it."

Everyone agreed that with better tools, friendly help, and a climate controlled environment, the Lenox workshop was preferable to their garages. Plus, it kept them out of marital trouble, they laughed.

When Nelson saw what the men were doing for the kids, he couldn't help but join in.

The health benefits of toy-making are numerous, including exercise, skill-building, and what Bob Nelson calls "sawdust therapy. There's something about the smell of oak, cedar and pine wood being sanded."

"Another big thing is, friendships get hatched under this roof," said Nelson. "We become good friends and share a lot, about our worries in life, and practical questions like, 'Where do you go to have this done?' It's really a community."

"Making toys is therapeutic to us and therapeutic to the recipients," he said.

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