

Santa's workshop comes to life

Area woodworkers build toys throughout the year

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Leo Steger displays some of the toys made at the workshop in Reynoldsburg on Oct. 25. PHOTOS BY SAMANTHA MADAR/COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Santa Claus had a few extra elves to help with his toy-making, but it's a bit south of the North Pole – in central Ohio.

Creating everything from puzzles to a ring toss game, ducks that waddle and doll beds, the Woodworkers of Central Ohio (WOCO) worked individually and in groups throughout the year to build holiday toys for local children in Franklin County and surrounding counties. Two groups, the Termites and the I-70 Group, meet weekly. They spend months building thousands of toys that are donated to central Ohio agencies each year through the Holiday Toy Program.

In total, the club includes more than 200 hobbyist woodworkers. The annual holiday toy-making project is its largest community service project.

Last year, the group crafted over 3,300 toys to donate to 18 central Ohio agencies, said Russ Frye, the club's president.

Creating a joyous occasion for kids

Some of the toys made by the group are created from schematics, while others are created from the woodworkers' imaginations. All are handcrafted.

Once the toys are built, they're given to local nonprofits which, in turn, pass them along to children they serve.

Frye attended a toy distribution event in 2024 where he watched kids gravitate toward the handmade wooden toys over packaged ones from the store.

"You could go over here, and you get a doll from Walmart, but here's a doll bed or a jewelry box that somebody has made," he said. "And kids seem to like those things more."

The truth in Frye's observation is revealed by the elated reactions of the children who spend the holidays at St. Vincent Family Services, one of the organizations served by the toy program.



Woodworkers make a doll bed at the workshop.

“They *love* these toys. They are so special. Getting a wooden, handmade toy is so unusual in this day and age, and the kids love getting to open them,” said Susan Lewis Kaylor, president and CEO of St. Vincent Family Services, a community behavioral health agency that serves youth and families in Franklin County and the central Ohio region.

“Many of the children living with us have experienced significant abuse and neglect. We want to make sure they have a wonderful Christmas Eve and Christmas; the holidays are hard when you don’t have a home to go to,” said Kaylor, who is also a Jefferson Township trustee.



Steger helps make a doll bed.

“The toys we get from these longtime donors are such a treat. They’re quite a variety, including little dinos and ducks, a whole bunch of farm animals, and dolls,” she said.



**Mary Kay March speaks about the toy-making process at the workshop on Oct. 25 in Reynoldsburg. SAMANTHA MADAR/
COLUMBUS DISPATCH**

Frye likewise noted the “amazing” array of items made by the woodworkers. One in particular is a favorite among young gift recipients.

“One of the really popular toys, it’s a duck that a child pushes with a long stick behind it, and the feet flap,” he said, making a waddle sound and laughing.

WOCO’s donation to Gladden Community House also contains a “wide variety” of items reflecting the broad range of individuals, families, and groups the nonprofit agency serves.

“They donated toys, as well as items like jewelry boxes and mirrors, which are perfect for our middle-school kids and seniors,” said Corina Wohlers, director of development for the Franklinton facility.

“The woodworkers have been very kind to us for many years,” she said.

Toys more than just playthings

Like Santa, the woodcrafters deliver not just gifts but also holiday spirit, especially to folks sometimes forgotten during the season of giving, Wohlers said in a prepared release.

“Not only do the woodworkers provide valuable toys, especially needed for our preschoolers’ motor development, but their handcrafted goods support our seniors. Seniors are one of the most overlooked groups at the holidays and these woodworkers come through for them every year,” she wrote.

“We are so grateful for their support and proud they make such a difference in the holidays for our smallest to wisest at Gladden,” Wohlers said.

The durable wooden toys also symbolize something missing from the lives of some children at St. Vincent: permanence and ownership.

“The toys are something we give to them that they’re allowed to keep and take with them when they’re discharged. Most of our kids are here six to nine months; these toys last a lifetime,” Kaylor said.

“This is one of the special things they take with them as they, hopefully, heal and are able to move on with their lives,” she said.

Not least of all, the donated toys are a reminder of the importance of gratitude, caring, and helping others.

“It reminds us that it’s a privilege to take care of kids who don’t have a home they can live in right now,” Kaylor said. “We are really grateful for people who care for our kids.”

Woodworkers use their talents to give back

When they aren’t making toys, the woodworking club makes dressers for the Furniture Bank of Central Ohio. Since 2011, the group has made almost 19,000 dressers, Frye said.

WOCO members also making coloring cutouts for patients at Nationwide Children’s Hospital. They start working on the holiday toys in the spring, continuing through early December.

The I-70 Group typically has about five to 10 attendees each week. Two of the organizers, Leo Steger and Mary Kay March, met and fell in love via the woodworking organization. They now host the Saturday morning toy-making sessions.

“It’s fun. It’s a way to give back to the community,” Steger said. “There’s a lot of less-advantaged people, and it’s a way to give back.”

Kindness and religion reporter Sophia Veneziano may be reached at sveneziano@dispatch.com. This article was made possible by support from the Center for HumanKindness at The Columbus Foundation, which has partnered with The Columbus Dispatch to profile those making our community a better place. Help us inspire kindness by suggesting people, initiatives or organizations for Reporter Sophia Veneziano to profile. She can be reached at sveneziano@dispatch.com. Learn more at Dispatch.

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