

Lasting treasures

Village Woodworkers add Christmas cheer to children's lives

LORIEN E. DAHL
The Sentinel-Record



HOT
SPRINGS
VILLAGE
— The
Hot
Springs
Village

The Sentinel-Record/Lorien E. Dahl

QUALITY WORK: Hot Springs Village Woodworkers Club member Ken Koepp packs up handmade toys for distribution to area children's organizations. In addition to building toys for younger children, club members also build gifts for teenagers, including jewelry boxes, hand mirrors and inlaid medallions.

Woodworkers Club was organized in the mid-1990s, and for almost that long, its members have handcrafted gifts for distribution to area children who don't have much in life to call their own.



The Sentinel-Record/Lorien E. Dahl

CLASSIC FUN: Four-year-old Emma Wingo checks out an array of handcrafted wooden duck pull toys during the recent Hot Springs Village Woodworkers Club toy distribution meeting. This year, 33 members made more than 460 toys that will be given as gifts to area children in need.

Each year, the woodworkers spend months with saws, sandpaper and varnish to create quality items that have the potential to last not just a lifetime, but for generations.

In 2016, 33 of the club's members created some 463 toys and keepsakes that will make Christmas brighter for children of all ages in need, whether because of family poverty or a lack of parents altogether.

During this year's annual toy distribution meeting, representatives from eight of the nine children's agencies who receive the gifts spoke to the audience, expressing

thanks and sharing stories about the club's meaningful work.

James Byrd, of the DHS Division of Children and Family Services for Garland County, said he sees mostly children who have been removed from unstable or unsafe homes, and who will likely spend time in foster care, when foster parents are available.

He said youths who come under the care of his agency often arrive with little but a trash bag of clothing, so the appreciation runs deep when they are able to receive their own wooden treasure.

Richelle Wingo serves as the Christmas coordinator for Hillcrest Children's Home, which is often the next stop after DHS when foster parent homes are full. She said children at Hillcrest cherish having something they can keep, and even hand down to their own children someday.

She said anyone can buy toys at a store, but the woodworkers pour their “blood, sweat, tears and talents” into creating something that lasts for these children who have been living in a temporary kind of world.

Brenda Burton, of Benton’s Community Christian Outreach, called the distribution “a blessing,” and said she hears from children years later who still have their toys. And Allen Williams spoke on behalf of the Kiwanis Club of Hot Springs Village, saying each gift is “a quality item that will never be forgotten by these kids.”

The wooden valuables were also distributed to Safe Haven in Hot Springs, Mountain Pine’s Head Start and preschool programs, and Lake Hamilton’s Head Start and Early Head Start.

Toy Project Coordinator Doug Lambert made sleek handheld mirrors this year for older girls. This is his second season to coordinate, and he said it feels great to see all the gifts filling tables on distribution night. “It’s just amazing when the guys bring all that stuff in,” he told *The Sentinel-Record*.

He’s been working with wood all his life, since learning how from his own father, and recently handed down a cradle to his youngest granddaughter that has now been in the family for generations, having been handmade by his dad.

He plans to make wooden puzzles, like his father did for him, which will add to the number of wooden gifts that also showcase handpainting, like the doll cradles that are already a popular club project.

For the cradles, toy teams work on assembly, then additional members of the Village community add artistic touches with paintings on the headboard and footboard featuring Disney characters and other beloved childhood images. Another group stitches small quilts and makes matching pillows — all sure to delight any little girl with a penchant for doll play.

The Woodworkers Club is set up as a mentoring situation for people who haven’t worked with wood before, and one member even offers use of his shop and tools for building toys or other projects during the year.

Although the Christmas gift distribution is the largest service project for the nonprofit club, its members always have something to work on.

Anyone interested in learning more about the club can attend a monthly meeting, held at 6:30 p.m. on the second Wednesday of every month in Hot Springs Village’s Ponce de Leon Center.

Lambert said of the Woodworkers, “It’s just a lot of neat and very talented guys who like to do things for other people.”