

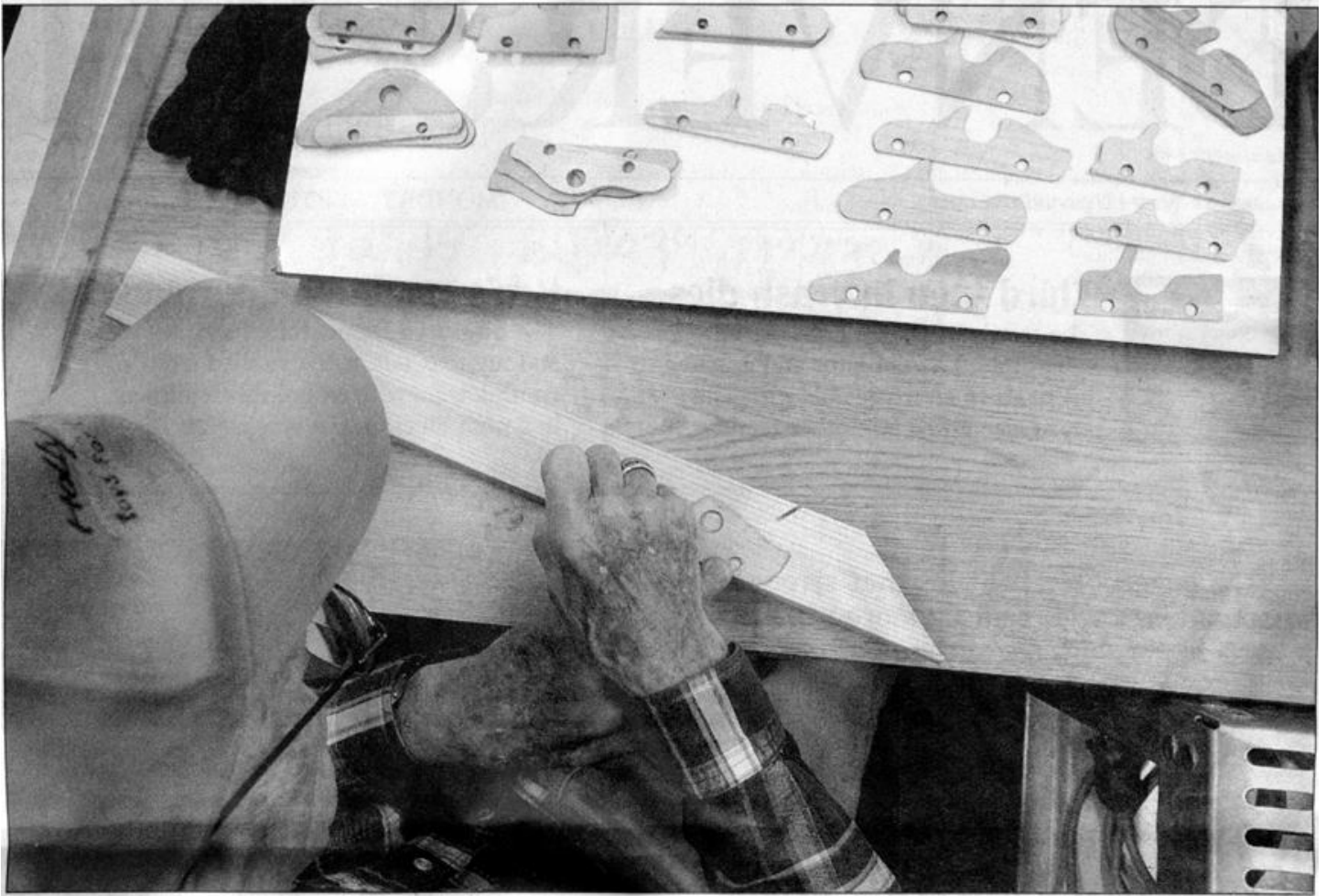
THE DENVER POST

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Andy Cross | The Denver Post

Dub Browning, 88, puts wheels on a wooden car in the workshop at Holly Creek Retirement Community in Centennial. Since March 2006, he and five other World War II-era veterans have assembled 12,000 of the toys to be given to poor children all over the world. > 2B



Photos by Andy Cross | The Denver Post

Harry Emerson, 89, traces patterns of cars onto wood, to be cut out and assembled in a shop at Holly Creek Retirement Community in Centennial. Emerson and five cohorts love to receive photos of kids around the world holding their cars.

Handcrafted smiles

Through a nonprofit, six World War II-era veterans have made 12,000 toy cars for poor children in at least 44 countries

Joey Bunch
Denver Post Staff Writer

Centennial - Dub Browning's wrinkled hands operated with the skill of a surgeon until each wooden race car glided perfectly across the table before him.

"I've put the wheels on every car that's come out of here," said the 88-year-old resident of Holly Creek Retirement Community.

A fleet of unpainted pine racers was parked at the end of the table. "Every one has to be just right."

Since March 2006, Browning and five other World War II-era veterans, all in their late 70s to late 80s, have cranked out 12,000 cars for children in at least 44 countries through the Denver-based Toys for God's Kids program.

When Browning finds a spot that could splinter or an edge that could cut tiny hands, he smooths it out with a belt sander.

The room looks like a Santa's workshop for aging elves.

As Browning worked, his five partners - John Nelson, Russ Yost, Glenn James, Jack Zobel and Harry Emerson - were busy around him, sawing, drilling, sanding and assembling.

"They all care about other human beings, especially children," said Marlin Dorhout, a Gates Rubber Co. retiree who started Toys for God's Kids after a visit to Nicaragua in 2000 with Habitat for Humanity.

A wood hobbyist, Dorhout started handing out his handmade wooden toys to children.

"I became the most popular person in the village," he said, remembering the beaming smiles of poor children, many of whom had never owned a toy. "After that, I knew this was what I wanted to do."

The program is a nonprofit with no budget. Stairs Inc. in Louisville and Masterpiece Stairs in Denver donate their scrap lumber for the cars.

Most of the tools belong to Nelson, a skilled woodcarver who set up the workshop in a vacant room in Holly Creek's parking garage. He recruited his friends to help make toys last year.

"It's a satisfying feeling for the guys to do something they know puts a smile on a child's face," said Nelson, an Army Air Corps pilot in World War II. "That's the only paycheck there is."

Well, not quite. The men love to receive photographs of children holding their new toys. They have pictures from Iraq, India, China, Africa and Nepal, among scores of other Third World countries and war-torn regions.

Anyone traveling abroad can take along a cache of toys. Airline pilots sometimes show up with empty suitcases to fill.

This fall, Toys for God's Kids is asking for \$20 donations - the price of postage to send a box of 100 wooden cars to a soldier in Iraq.

A similar campaign last year resulted in 6,000 cars being distributed in Iraq and Afghanistan - politics and religion trumped by smiles and generosity, Dorhout said.

"We never hold a child responsible for some silly idea their parents or leaders have," he said.

The license plate on each car is stamped USA, however, "because the USA needs some good publicity," he said.

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Online: Information about the Toys for God's Kids program. denverpost.com



Fresh from the volunteers' assembly line, wooden cars pile up. Toys for God's Kids is asking for \$20 donations, to send boxes of cars to soldiers in Iraq, who will hand them out.